

Title: Heart and Soul

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Summary: The Dementor attack on Harry during the summer after his fourth year leaves him on the verge of having his wand snapped. Unwilling to leave anything to chance, Sirius Black sets events into motion which will change Harry's life forever.

Rating: PG

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Author's Thanks: Thanks to Cibbler and Déjà Vu for looking over the initial chapter and for glancing over my outline and telling me where I'm messing up.

Author's Notes: Here is my first attempt at a long Harry Potter fic. The outline for the first installation of this series has been completed and I have a number of ideas for the second and know where the whole story is ultimately going. I think this will end up being a three part series, but that is still up in the air as well. To give everyone an idea of its anticipated length, the outline is over forty pages long and at this point, plans for more than fifty chapters. I hope that everyone enjoys reading it as much as I have enjoyed planning and writing it. Please note the following:

1. This story is based on a challenge I ran across on one of the Harry Potter groups on Yahoo. Although I normally tend to keep the details of my stories fairly close to the vest, since this is based on a challenge, I want to give credit for the idea. Reading the challenge (location given below) will give away the premise and some of what happens in the first fifteen chapters or so of the first installment. Everything beyond that is me expanding on the premise, and although this will be recognizable as Harry's fifth year from canon, there will be significant differences. It goes completely off in a different direction after that. If you are burning with curiosity, go ahead and have a look at the next paragraph to see where the challenge can be found, otherwise skip down to point two.

The challenge which this story is based upon can be found on the '3 or 4 Part Harmony' group on Yahoo Groups, under Challenges, Harry Potter and the Ambassador's Daughter. Although I am not necessarily following that document exactly, it will give a pretty good summary of the premise of this story, so go there to see more details. Thanks to pilamsega for posting a challenge which caught my attention and imagination. I hope I am able to do it justice.

2. This is not for fans of canon pairings—I'm not a fan of them and will never write a story in which they figure prominently. Other than that and the information on the challenge above, I'm not about to give away more about what ultimately happens to the characters—who is good, bad, indifferent, prat, ends up with whom, whatever.

3. Please also be warned that the primary relationship will involve Harry with two women—for those who don't read harem stories (although two is hardly a harem), please be warned.

**\*\*NOTE\*\***I have changed my user name - please note that this story is by the writer formerly known as Jedi Emeritus. (Sorry, couldn't resist!)

"You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body."

C. S. Lewis

## Prologue

It was unfortunate but true—there were far too many similarities between Azkaban and 12 Grimmauld Place.

Of course, many would consider such a statement maudlin at best and outright farcical at worst. After all, how could a house—admittedly a run-down, gloomy mansion straight from a Muggle horror movie—be the equal of the most feared wizarding prison in the world, one which few, if any, were known to leave with their lives, much less their sanity, intact? For instance, while an inmate at Azkaban could expect no more than a small, dank, dirty, and cheerless cell, Grimmauld Place was at least spacious, with three levels, all of which were available to a tired and bored occupant.

But therein lay the similarities once again, as the accessible space in which to wander was no cheerier than the cell back in the prison had been, decorated as it was by dark, peeling wallpaper, a row of severed elf heads, and gloomy, threadbare furnishings, among other decorations, all equally cheery and attractive. And whereas the prison of Azkaban boasted some of the vilest creatures to ever roam the earth, the great house at Grimmauld Place boasted its own version of evil and horror: a house-elf who wandered around the house muttering about Blood Traitors, Mudbloods, and filthy, nasty

masters and a painting of a dead, bitter old madwoman who berated everyone who didn't live down to her low standards. In a word: everyone.

It was an uncharitable thought about his mother, perhaps, but Sirius Black was nothing if not honest, and his life experiences had jaded him beyond the point of making meaningless excuses for his less than worthy relatives, even before his extended sojourn in Azkaban. His whole family, while most had not been Death Eaters, had certainly held similar beliefs with Voldemort and his merry band of crazies and had, as a whole, been about as pleasant as a nest of hungry acromantulas—and almost as personable too. Unfortunately, the décor in their main domicile had matched the family attitudes quite nicely—it had not been a cheery place growing up, especially for one who by inclination had never espoused the same ideals as his family.

The sun was setting in the west, illuminating the walls of the room in the softest pastels—yellows, oranges, and pinks, all mixed together, creating a brighter atmosphere in the old house than it would ever see at any other time of day. The room was large, and like the rest of the old house, the furnishings tatty. The wallpaper, where it had not completely worn down to the wall behind, was faded and gray, not that even whole it would have inspired any more than a glance and a shudder. But this room did have one redeeming feature—it was the home of his one faithful companion, Buckbeak, the hippogriff who was as highly sought after as Sirius himself.

Sighing, Sirius patted the sleeping hippogriff on the head and leaned back in his chair. He had never liked this house and could not remember having spent more than a few moments in his mother's room as a youngster. Even then, from what he could remember of his few times in this room, the room had been decaying, much as the rest of the house—falling into ashes as the proud history of his family crumbled along with it. At one time, the Blacks had been among the most respected and influential families in all of wizarding Britain. The changes in their family fortunes did not happen overnight, but although he was aware many of his family would have disagreed, to Sirius it was obvious that the decision of his ancestor Antares Black to support the dark forces began their decline. For more than four centuries, the Blacks had made a point of living up to their dark name, causing their former power to be sapped as the family died supporting lost causes and evil Pureblood agendas. Now,

he was the last of the once strong family to bear the name—of his three aunts, one had been disowned, and all had married others and now bore different names.

And although he did not like to admit it, he was also painfully aware that centuries of inbreeding had contributed to the downfall. Just one example was his mother, whose maiden name had been Black—she had been a cousin of his father, Orion. There were far too many instances of such matches in his family tree, and Sirius had been desperate since he had understood the ramifications of such close marriages to avoid the same. Breaking the cycle of dark leanings and inbred marriages would, he hoped, change his family's fortunes and give his children a happier growing environment than the one to which he had been subjected.

Sirius snorted bitterly, causing his faithful companion to open one baleful eye in reproach before closing it and snuggling contentedly down into the mattress once again. The antics of his companion went largely unnoticed as Sirius stared at the walls of his mother's chamber, a tear slipping silently down his cheek in regret for the path his life had taken. There had been so much promise, so much to look forward to, now all turned to ashes.

He remembered the dreams of a group of teenage boys, dreams which now did not have a hope of coming true. Their sons (of course, the Marauders would all have first-born sons) would play together, eventually taking Hogwarts by storm, carrying on their fathers' tradition of pranks, mischief, and enmity with the hated Slytherins. Their families would grow closer and closer, forming a powerful force in the wizarding world, promoting change and equality for all, making their world a better place.

And where were they all now? Pettigrew, a traitor, betraying Sirius' best friend to his most hated enemy; Remus, growing old before his time due to his infliction and the life he had lived; Sirius, having spent most of his adult life in the worst hell on earth for the crimes of another; and James, now dead these fourteen years... All lost, ashes like all of their dreams for the future.

James—Merlin, how he missed James! The Marauders had been close in their mischief and adventures, although Peter had always been somewhat of an outsider even then, but Sirius and James had

been like brothers, certainly closer than Sirius had ever been to his own brother.

A rare smile lighting his features, Sirius thought back to the day he had first met James. As a young boy of eleven, Sirius had been frightened at the prospect of going out into the world, but paradoxically, had been equally frightened at the thought of remaining in the decrepit old house which had been his home. Not knowing much beyond the world his parents had weaved for him, the only thing the young Sirius had known for certain was that the vitriolic Pureblood dogma, spouted so often by his mother, had somehow never sat well with him, although he certainly could not have claimed to have much experience beyond the confines of his home, his parents' circle of friends, and the few playmates he had had from among the children of his parents' friends.

Enter James Potter, one who Sirius knew immediately was a political enemy of his family, and Sirius could not help but be immediately charmed by his newfound friend's self confidence and disarming charisma. Even at a young age, James had had a presence about him, much the same as his son had evinced many years later, Sirius decided after some reflection. They had become instant friends on that train to Hogwarts, and by the time they had reached the hallowed halls of the ancient institution, Sirius had known what his life had been missing amongst the conniving and hate-filled halls of his former house.

The Sorting Hat had certainly picked up on Sirius' strongest characteristic, as he was soon to find out, for it took a substantial measure of bravery to go against Lady Walburga Black. Not only had Sirius become the only member of the Black family other than his Aunt Andromeda to be sorted into a house other than Slytherin (even his great-aunt Dorea, who had defied her parents and married a Potter, had been a Slytherin), but even Andromeda had not had the audacity to be sorted into the much-hated house of Gryffindor alongside the aforementioned Potters, Blood Traitors, and enemies to the house of Black for centuries. Within days of the event, word had made its way back to his mother, who had responded with a steady stream of Howlers and diatribe-filled letters and communiqués to the Headmaster that he had made a mistake. His parents had even undertaken a Floo powder journey to Hogwarts, demanding the Headmaster repeat the Sorting so their eldest could be removed from the "house of Blood Traitors" and placed back into

the place for all "proper Pureblood wizards". Her anger and spite upon Dumbledore refusing her demand had been loud and long, but to the relief of the young boy, the Headmaster had stood firm, stating the Sorting Hat's decision was final, unless other factors made a student's position within a house untenable. Such was not the case in this situation.

Swearing her son was betraying the family, his mother was forced to retreat from the school in defeat, but not before informing Sirius, in a loud and wrathful manner, he was not allowed to return home for Christmas.

"You may stay in the house of traitors and cowards, if it means so much to you, but in my house, you are not welcome."

To that very day, Sirius was able to recall the exact words of her denunciation, the crazed look in her eyes, the spittle which flew from her foam-flecked lips, and the cold, austere stare his father had fixed upon him as he looked on with disdain.

Sirius chuckled, remembering his mother had always been the spokesperson of the family, while his father had always looked on in disapproving silence. In fact, his father, a dour, gaunt sort of man, had rarely, in Sirius' memory, spoken up or distinguished himself in any sort of manner. Sirius was uncertain whether this was by choice or by necessity, but he suspected his father had been a rather notable example of the perils of inbreeding. There simply was nothing remarkable or of note to remember him by.

As a result, cut adrift from his family, the young Sirius would have been lost were it not for his new friendship with young James Potter. Quickly figuring out the problem, James had immediately sent a message off to his father, receiving a response the next day, complete with an invitation to join the Potter family for Christmas. From that day forward, were inseparable, becoming the brothers in spirit which James never had and sharing a closeness Sirius had never experienced with his own brother, Regulus.

Of course, Lord Potter had been a little distant and more difficult to get to know than his son, hardly surprising since the elderly man had lived with enmity with the Black family his whole life. But once Sirius had come to know the man, he had become almost like a surrogate

father for a young boy in need of someone to look up to. In a way, James' father was as responsible for the man Sirius had become as was James himself—and certainly more than his father or any others of his family could be credited, even if they did want to take credit, considering the fact that Sirius had essentially turned his back on centuries of family political and philosophical leanings. Although he was called back to his parents' home on occasion over the years (generally in an attempt to persuade him of the "error of his ways"), from that point forward, Sirius had spent much of his time with James' family, finally being disowned by his own at the age of sixteen. His father had died only a year after he completed Hogwarts, his mother following five years later. Although he had been disowned by his mother, it was supreme irony that his father had never made it official, perhaps realizing his brother Regulus was likely not destined for a long life as a minion of the Dark Lord (prophetic in hindsight). And with his incarceration being illegal due to his never having been convicted of any crime, Sirius retained his rights as Lord Black upon his father's death, regardless of his time in prison, whereas if his father had made his banishment from the family official, then Draco Malfoy, as the nearest relation to his father, would have assumed the title of Lord Black, greatly enhancing the rich, yet relatively new, family's fortunes and prestige.

The portrait of his mother now hung in the entrance hall to the old house, convincing Sirius it had been placed there to torture him and him alone. The first time he had ventured into the house after his escape from Azkaban, his mother had praised him for finally "seeing the light" and betraying those awful Potters to his rightful lord, her malicious and contemptible visage fairly glowing with glee at the demise of Sirius' closest friend. He swore his ears still rang with the shrieks his mother had made when he had told her, contempt dripping from his voice, that he had not betrayed his friends and certainly considered the monster to whom she so freely gave praise the lowest form of scum to be found. Only the memory of her wrath could bring a smile to his lips, as he finally gave the hateful old woman a dressing down he had longed to give during her lifetime.

As amusing as it was to bait his mother, Sirius found that today his mind could not stay focused, and once again his thoughts drifted back to his lost friend, and the melancholy which had become his constant companion once again settled into his soul. The death of James had left a hole which still felt like a gaping wound, even now, more than thirteen years later. He had hoped to begin filling the

chasm through a relationship with James' son—his godson—once his name had been cleared and he could take up his duties as Harry's godfather, but once again things had gone sour.

Sirius cursed loudly at his mistake—if only he'd thought to keep Pettigrew bound and unconscious until he had been safely handed over to the proper authorities, ensuring that the rat would finally reap his rewards for his nefarious deeds, then things would have turned out very different. With the rat being proven to be alive, Sirius was certain Wizengamot would finally have been forced to grant his long-delayed trial and the travesty of justice would finally have been overturned under the effects of Veritaserum. Then, he could have been granted custody of the young man and begun the task of improving his life, finally fulfilling the vow he had made to James as a young man to watch over and protect his young son. The whispers in the back of his consciousness, that he had been in no shape at the time to be responsible for a teenage boy, he conveniently pushed back to the recesses of his mind to be ignored.

No, instead the rat had fled and Sirius had been forced to continue in this half existence, hiding, skulking, avoiding the authorities as the most hunted man in magical Britain, wishing desperately he had some way to be useful, not only to Harry, but also in the fight to oppose Voldemort. His forced exile was seriously beginning to grate against his nerves, which had already been battered by years of Dementor exposure.

The first months of his freedom had been trying, but he had made it through, intent on the need to protect his godson and bring the traitor Pettigrew to justice. Although the second goal had been unsuccessful, Harry's being safe was by far the most important consideration, and Sirius had been persuaded by Dumbledore to go some place safe so he could begin to heal. His sojourn in the South Pacific had been restful and soothing, but his subsequent return to Britain due to Harry's inclusion in the Tri-Wizard Tournament had put him back on the run. Unable to bear being far away from Harry during his trials in the tournament, Sirius had decided to go resume his Animagus form again. He had hidden out in a cave in the nearby mountains, near enough to Harry to be of use if necessary, hoping his nearby presence would give the boy a sense of confidence in the damnable tournament if nothing else. Between trying to be there for Harry, and trips back to Grimmauld to look through some of James' old papers, trying to find some way to improve Harry's life and



assume his role of guardian, even if unknown to the general populace, Sirius had at least been busy enough that his own problems had become secondary, and therefore, largely forgotten.

However, once that had all been resolved, it had been back to Grimmauld Place, and this time, there was no escape from the disgusting old house—although he would cheerfully have gone back to the South Pacific and sat on the beach, Dumbledore had cautioned against it. Now that Voldemort had returned, even though the official line from Fudge was that his return was impossible, the Ministry was on the lookout for him leaving the country. That—and the fact that they had stepped up the search for him within the confines of Britain itself—meant Grimmauld had now effectively become his prison, much as Azkaban had been before it.

The worst part of his situation was the feeling of uselessness, which pervaded his entire being. He wanted—he needed to be of use to his godson. His promise to James upon the birth of the little sprog remained unfulfilled, wrecked by his impulsive decision to pursue Wormtail instead of caring for Harry as was his duty. He had no way of knowing if he still would have been thrown into Azkaban without trial for betraying James and Lily, but at the very least he would have been more coherent when the questioners came rather than standing dazed in the middle of a war zone, slapped in manacles, and carted off before he was aware of what was happening. He had failed Harry once, but he was determined the experience would not be repeated.

Harry—a part of him was amazed they had become as close as they had in so short a time. The adventure at the end of Harry's third year had forged a bond between them which could only be possible under the most stressful of situations, and the limited time they had been in one another's company had only served to strengthen it. Looking at his godson, Sirius could only be astonished at the resemblance he showed to his parents. He had traces of Lily in him—the eyes, which everyone commented on, being the most obvious—but otherwise, he was his father's son. Give him the brown eyes of his father, and Sirius would have been hard pressed to tell them apart.

In temperament, though, Harry was much more like his mother than his father. Lily had been introspective and studious, quiet until provoked, and then like a hurricane—tempestuous in her fury, but

quickly calming once that fury had been spent. And although Harry was not as confident as his mother, his quiet and introverted nature was eerily similar to the woman Sirius had known. James, by contrast, had been brash and self-assured, even as a boy of eleven, likely to get into mischief, as his career as a Marauder later attested to, and to be honest, somewhat of a bully until age and experience had tempered his youthful exuberance. In other words, nothing like his quiet son, although Sirius suspected Harry's experiences with his relatives were a major cause of his demeanor. The mere thought of those horrid Dursleys caused Sirius' fists to clench in rage. If he had anything to do with it, Harry's removal from that house at the end of this summer would be his last.

Knowing his anger would not solve anything, Sirius forced himself to calm down, and his thoughts to return to his former musings. The other major player in both Lily and James' life was a certain dark and broody potions master. Sirius knew that much of James' problems with Snape—and what had occurred after—were in a large part due to their differences in temperament and their reactions to each other. Snape had immediately dismissed James as an arrogant Pureblood (Sirius had to be honest and acknowledge the charge was to a certain extent true), while James had responded in kind, calling Snape a "greasy git" and an antisocial loner (in this sense, James had been completely correct). The two had struck sparks immediately, and the enmity between Slytherin and Gryffindor had certainly not helped.

If it had not been for Lily—who knew Snape before coming to Hogwarts—there likely would have been nothing more than a simple dislike between the two young men rather than the full-blown rivalry and hatred which eventually blossomed. Although Lily had been initially repulsed by James' manners and arrogance, he had quickly caught on to her displeasure and changed some things about himself, not only to impress Lily, but also—as he told Sirius several times—because it was the right thing to do, in order to improve himself. It was then that the man James was to become was truly unleashed, as he became more studious, more tolerant to others, and more at peace with who he truly was. He became and a better friend than ever—as true a leader as Sirius had ever seen.

This, of course, had the effect of improving his relationship with Lily to the point that by their fourth year the two had become almost inseparable, and Lily, although she was too studious and rule-

oriented to ever actively participate in their mischief, became an unofficial member of their group, and in the process drew almost as close to James' friends as James himself. Sirius had even harbored a crush for the beautiful young witch for some time, but knowing how close Lily and James were—and suspecting there would never be anyone in her life to match James—he decided early on he would not invite the heartache of unrequited love. Instead, he had decided to control his feelings and be happy for them. Anything else, he suspected, would have driven a wedge between him and his closest friend, causing rivalry and bitterness, and likely dissolving their friendship.

Unfortunately, a direct consequence of James' improved relationship with Lily was her distance and eventual estrangement from her childhood friend. To say Snape was unhappy with their closeness would be a gross understatement, and the two had had many disagreements and outright fights over the matter. What Sirius had feared would happen between him and James had actually happened between Lily and Snape, to the point that by the middle of their fifth year the two former friends would not even acknowledge one another, let alone speak to each other. It was obvious Snape had blamed James for the loss of his friend (some cynical members of their group had insisted Lily had been Snape's only friend), increasing his bitterness and hostility.

Without a doubt, this had led to an escalation to the rivalry between the two antagonists, and Snape's openly hostile and vindictive behavior toward James had been actively reciprocated by the Marauders. It had finally come to a head when their sixth-year Defense professor had had the bad judgment only weeks into the term to pair them off for a dueling exercise in class. Unsurprisingly, insults had been thrown back and forth, unsuitable hexes and curses had been exchanged, and the encounter had degenerated into an all-out war between the two, the final result of which was that they had both in the hospital wing. Dumbledore had had to step in, taking both Snape and James aside and informing them in no uncertain terms that their bitter rivalry had no place within the halls of Hogwarts—any further action between the two would result in significant repercussions, not excluding expulsion from school.

Their relationship after that could only be characterized as a cold war—neither relaxed in the presence of the other, and all their professors were careful not to pair them up or leave them alone for

any reason whatsoever (not that it was a good idea to ever mix students from Gryffindor and Slytherin without excessive supervision). Things had continued in this vein until late in the seventh year, when it had become evident Snape had become a Death Eater. Sirius and Remus had discussed it, and then cornered Snape alone one night just before curfew, without informing James or Lily what they were doing. What had followed had been an object lesson in the perils of crossing the Marauders and an ultimatum for Snape to stay away from Lily and James—any attempt to contact them, or attack them in the service of his new master would be met with lethal force. The memory of an ashen Snape quivering in the corridor where they had left him was still impressed upon Sirius' memory almost a decade and a half later.

From that moment forward, Snape had avoided the Marauders assiduously, but although he could not prove it, Sirius suspected James and Lily's betrayal had been in some way influenced by the man. Whether he had somehow gotten past the mutual animosity and recruited Peter or had in some fashion passed off information to Voldemort which had been instrumental in his pursuit of the Potters specifically, Sirius could not say, but his memory of seeing Snape on their last day of their seventh year would not leave him. His expression had been one of revenge at all costs. Heaven help the man if Sirius ever found out the truth of the events which had lead up to his friends' deaths—Merlin himself would not be able to save Snape against Sirius' wrath.

The sound of a chime broke through Sirius' musings and he stood and stretched. Although he had donated the old manor to the Order to use as a safe house (the primary occupants being, of course, himself and Buckbeak) and as headquarters, other than regular meetings of the order, there was not much in the way of traffic, which meant Sirius was left largely to his solitary musings. Periodically, though, someone would stop by for some reason or another, and Sirius did not much care who they were—as long as they could break up the monotony of his life.

Giving Buckbeak a final pat on the head, to which the hippogriff wuffed softly, Sirius exited the room and made his way down the stairs and into the main hallway on the ground floor. His arrival sent the painting of his mother into fits, presumably berating him once again for his "unfortunate" choices, but Sirius merely grinned cheekily and flipped a jaunty salute. The silencing charm he had

finally figured how to lay around the portrait had caused her, if it were possible for a ghost, to experience an apoplectic fit, but for once, the silence suited Sirius quite well. Smiling to himself and thinking just how good it was to tweak his mother's nose, Sirius entered the front sitting room, where the fireplace was located.

He instantly knew there was something wrong. Although it was not unusual for Dumbledore to arrive at Grimmauld unannounced, the characteristically grandfatherly smile and twinkling eyes were absent and his visage held a look of concern and anxiety.

"Ah, Sirius, I was about to go looking for you," Dumbledore greeted him as he dropped into one of the armchairs, his hunched shoulders and almost boneless manner, generally foreign to the usually spry and active (especially for his age) Headmaster, betraying his weariness.

After staring at him with concern for several moments, Sirius finally followed suit and sat, already bracing himself for whatever news had rattled the usually imperturbable man. "What's wrong, Albus? I presume this is not a social call."

Dumbledore shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing in response. "Though I wish it were, alas, I fear it is only the beginning."

"It's Harry, isn't it?"

Dumbledore chuckled ruefully, causing Sirius to reflect that almost everything seemed to revolve around Harry. He was a flashpoint, a true magnet for trouble—as his time in Hogwarts had proved—whether he wanted to be one or not.

"Yes, Sirius, it is. I have just spent the past several hours in an emergency session of Wizengamot, trying to overturn the ministry's decision to expel young Mr. Potter from Hogwarts."

Sirius was aghast at the Headmaster's words. "Expelled from Hogwarts?"

"I was able to convince them he should be allowed to tell his side of the story, although it was not easy and may have used up what political capital I have left."

"I think you had better start at the beginning, Albus," Sirius responded, still confused as to why the ministry could possibly be considering expelling his godson from Hogwarts. "What happened?"

Sighing yet again, Dumbledore glanced over at Sirius, his demeanor more wretched than Sirius could ever remember seeing. "It appears young Harry and that whale of a boy he calls his cousin were attacked by Dementors this afternoon."

Whatever Sirius had expected, Dementors was certainly not on the list. "Dementors? In Little Whinging?"

"I am afraid so, Sirius," Dumbledore confirmed.

"Is he all right?"

"Young Harry is fine. You have seen his Patronus—a mere two Dementors is child's play for the young man."

"So only two?" At Dumbledore's nod he continued, "But why? How did they end up so far from Azkaban?"

"Unfortunately, I have no answers, Sirius. I was called in by Arthur Weasley late this afternoon—he had gotten wind of the Trace detection and the actions carried out against Harry by the Improper Use of Magic Office. I Apparated to Little Whinging immediately and spoke with young Harry myself. He and his cousin were set upon by two Dementors. Harry chased them away and helped his cousin home. Although young Harry was not affected to any great extent, his cousin was still in bad shape from the attack."

"And then?"

"I went to the Ministry building immediately, but the notice had already gone out."

Sirius winced. "It was bad, I assume?"

"Standard procedure," Dumbledore replied with a shrug. "As this was not his first incident, it was considered a repeat offense. He was to be detained pending a hearing and have his wand snapped immediately."

"Without them even asking why?" Sirius was enraged now—the Ministry was messing with his godson, and he was not about to sit back and do nothing. "Isn't that what the term Reasonable is all about in the statute? How can the Ministry be so stupid?"

"It is not so much stupid, as deliberately obtuse. Minister Fudge, in his infinite wisdom, has decided that Voldemort "simply can't have returned" and has responded to the threat in the time-honored tradition of burying his head in the sand rather than attempting to determine if Harry is telling the truth."

Nodding in response, Sirius responded, "I know all about Fudge denying Voldemort's return, but what about the Dementors? How can Fudge possibly hide the presence of Dementors in a Muggle area from the people?"

"Simple. The Dementors are under the control of the Ministry and therefore could not have been so many miles away from Azkaban. Thus, Harry must be lying and must be punished."

"But this is a Patronus, Albus. This isn't casting a levitating spell or turning his cousin into a pig. How can the Ministry explain away the fact that he cast such a powerful, specific spell?"

"The Trace cannot pick up the specific spell—it can only report that magic has been used and by whom. In fact, there is some question as to whether it is even that accurate. You have heard about the incident before Harry's second year?"

At Sirius' nod, he continued. "If the Trace picked up the magic of a house-elf and the Ministry thought it was Harry, it casts doubt on the whole detection system the Ministry has in place. I have tried since then to find out what it actually consists of, but have been denied. Perhaps I should have worked for the ministry, some time in my past..."

Noting the Headmaster's introspective visage, Sirius decided he needed to push the conversation back to the salient points. "Were there any witnesses?"

"Only Harry, Dudley, and a Squib I have tasked with keeping an eye on the young man. You know their testimonies will be ignored, if

they are even called to testify. Fudge seems determined to remove and discredit anyone who dares contradict him about Voldemort, and unfortunately, Harry, as the one who was actually there when he returned, is at the top of the list."

Sirius peered at Dumbledore intently. "I knew it was bad, Albus, but this I didn't know. What is he doing?"

"Fudge is, unfortunately, a passable peace time Minister, but he is wholly unsuited to leading us during times of war," Dumbledore responded. "He has declared it impossible for Voldemort to have returned and has spent the past several weeks trying to erode my support in the Wizengamot and the ICW, completely refusing to increase the Auror force, freeze the assets of known Death Eaters, or do anything else useful, for that matter. We stand on the brink of war—only Voldemort's need to gather his strength has prevented his taking over the Ministry already."

"And Wizengamot? Is there nothing that can be done by the legislative arm of the government?"

"Unfortunately, Wizengamot is paralyzed by opposing factions and is largely controlled by the Purebloods in any case—you know where their sympathies, if not outright support, will lie in the coming conflict, Sirius."

And Sirius did know all too well. In the past war, although only an ultraconservative few openly supported Voldemort, their leanings were evident. The powerful Pureblood faction was interested primarily in three things—protecting their power base, preserving their blood purity, and growing their wealth. The other faction to rival them could no longer be called true Pureblood because of their willingness to marry outside the core Pureblood society and were made up of families like the Potters—old, powerful, and rich, but to purists, they were tainted by the Muggleborn dregs of society, or Halfbloods, which were not much better.

Knowing, however, that the balance of power in Wizengamot was not the pressing issue, Sirius turned his attention back to the Headmaster, his mind playing with thoughts and half-made plans for his godson's future. Whether he had consciously considered the potential for magical Britain to become an unfriendly environment for Harry he did not know, but he had considered leaving the country for



other reasons—notably due to his distaste for a society which had locked him away in a hellish dungeon without caring about the truth.

"What about Harry, Albus? Is there any way to salvage this?"

"My influence has been lessened in Wizengamot, but not eliminated. I was able to defer Harry's expulsion pending a hearing on the matter."

"That's all good and well, Albus, but Wizengamot does not sound like a friendly environment for Harry right now. What are his chances?"

"Difficult to say," Dumbledore responded, his hands held together, his fingers steepled in front of his face as he thought the matter through. "I was able to carry the day based on a sense of fairness—when I informed Wizengamot of the spell Harry cast and the reason for it, even some of the Pureblood faction felt it wise to hear him out on the matter in lieu of summarily pronouncing sentence, due in part because the thought of Dementors anywhere they are not supposed to be is of great concern to all, regardless of political leanings. I believe I still hold enough support to ensure Harry's exoneration, but it may be a near thing."

Sirius slumped back in his chair, regarding Dumbledore, trying to get a sense of his confidence level. "Albus, this is Harry we are talking about here. I don't know why Voldemort is coming after him with such single-mindedness, but I do know if Harry's wand is snapped, he's an easy target. We have to be certain we can ensure his freedom before we commit to this. Once you take him into the Ministry for a hearing, our course is set—if he is convicted, they will snap his wand and bind his magic right there. Are you certain you can persuade them?"

"Alas, my dear boy, nothing is ever certain," Dumbledore replied, rising to his feet. "But I believe in the ultimate rightness of our cause and that we will carry the day."

"Albus, perhaps it's time to remove Harry from England."

His voice was quiet, yet controlled, and his statement caused Dumbledore to blink in surprise and sink back into his seat, a look of contemplation etched on his face. However, he was not known as a

powerful wizard and shrewd political opponent for nothing—he immediately recovered and regarded Sirius carefully.

"What are you suggesting, Sirius?"

"The political situation is no longer favorable for Harry here, if it ever was," Sirius replied regarding Dumbledore intently, making certain the other man knew through his body language exactly how serious he was. "I think the time has come to remove him from this society for his own good."

"And where would you take him?"

"Does it really matter? Anywhere would be preferable to here. We could relocate somewhere on the other side of the world, hire some tutors to complete his education—hell, I could help him complete the core subjects myself."

Dumbledore appeared lost in thought for several moments before focusing back on Sirius once again. He had a hint of the lecturing Headmaster in his manner, and Sirius felt like he was back in Hogwarts being taken to task for some prank. He had to admit to himself, somewhat ruefully, that although they had rarely been able to prove his complicity, more often than not, it had been he and his friends who had been the perpetrators of what had gone on in those hallowed halls.

"I believe your idea has two problems, Sirius. First, young Harry himself; he has made friends—very close friends—at Hogwarts, and I doubt you could convince him to leave them to Voldemort's tender mercies while he himself escaped to relative safety."

It was true—Sirius had not thought about that aspect of Harry's character. In that, he was very much his father's son.

"And the other?"

"Suppose we followed your plan and you moved with Harry to another country... then what?"

"I'm not certain I follow you..." Sirius responded uncertainly.

"Just this: if you were to go away from Britain, you may be safe for several years or even decades, but what happens once England becomes too small to contain the Dark Lord?"

To say Sirius was surprised was an understatement. "You aren't suggesting Voldemort will win!"

"I'm not suggesting it, Sirius, I am guaranteeing it. I believe Harry will have an integral part to play in Voldemort's ultimate defeat and he cannot do it if he is hidden away on some tropical island somewhere, drinking pina coladas and surfing."

Sirius regarded the Headmaster, his disbelief turning to a shrewd idea Dumbledore was holding back.

"You know something, Albus."

"Indeed I do," Dumbledore agreed with aplomb. "Now, however, is not the time to discuss this any further."

"Albus, he's my godson—I have to know."

"Rest assured, Sirius, in time I will tell you all I know. But the conversation must be deferred for another time—for now, I have some other tasks which cannot be delayed. Although we may have no other recourse but to flee from England at some future time, the time has not yet come—we have no other option but to continue to play the game in the hope of turning it in our favor. Young Harry has a destiny which he must fulfill for the good of the wizarding world—and indeed the world at large. I had hoped to delay the inevitable to give the young man some time to grow and mature, but it appears events have conspired against us and our time is now dwindling."

"I will have an accounting, Albus," Sirius growled in response. Although Dumbledore was a powerful wizard and excellent leader, he had a tendency to be secretive and at times viewed those around him as mere chess pieces. This time, however, Sirius would ensure he understood what Harry was facing and would face it by his side. He owed it to James; he owed it to himself.

"I understand, Sirius. I promise to give you a full accounting, but for now I must leave you."

Dumbledore moved to the Floo powder and grabbed a handful of it. But before he went through, he turned back to Sirius.

"I will arrange to have Harry evacuated from the Dursleys' and brought here. The situation there may now have become untenable in any case—they were incensed that Dudley's proximity to Harry resulted in the threat to his life and have demanded Harry's immediate removal, never to return."

"They won't do anything to him, will they?"

"Not at this time," Dumbledore confirmed. "I have informed his uncle we will be looking for alternate housing arrangements for the rest of the summer, but his removal will have to be handled with delicacy and kept from the knowledge of certain elements in the Ministry."

"I will inform Kreacher to prepare for an influx of guests."

"Be prepared for anything—the world is about to become a much darker place."

With that ominous pronouncement, Dumbledore disappeared into the Floo Network leaving Sirius alone with his thoughts.

Although he was concerned and worried about Harry's state of mind in the aftermath of the Dementors' attack, he knew of his godson's capabilities and was confident Harry would emerge unscathed from the experience. The more pressing concern was Dumbledore's words around Harry's destiny and the immediate threat of punishment. If Dumbledore could not convince Wizengamot to acquit Harry or at least agree he had acted in self-defense, then what? Could he possibly take the chance of failure? Was there anything he could do?

A grim yet determined smile crossed Sirius' face, as he considered that he did indeed have another option. It had fallen literally out of the sky onto his lap the previous spring while he was searching through some of James' old family documents, partially to determine if James had left anything behind which would be of use to his son, partially in a vain attempt to find some way to remove Harry from the Tri-Wizard competition. His search had led him to a most startling document which had the power to change Harry's life and bring him some desperately-needed allies. Although those plans were still

some months away, they could be accelerated—had to be accelerated in order to be of use to his godson in the immediate future.

A twinge of guilt made itself known in Sirius' conscience, understanding as he did this revelation had the power to turn Harry's life upside-down and that it had far reaching consequences for not only his godson, but also for a particular friend of his. Yet, it was obvious to Sirius that anything which could be done must be done for Harry's sake—he would never be able to live with himself if he left even one arrow in the quiver and the situation went wrong. But it would not do to tell Dumbledore at this stage—he would find out when everyone else did.

His mind made up, Sirius turned and stalked down the hallway to his room on the second floor. He simply could not chance failure—too much depended on this, especially if Dumbledore's words about Harry's importance to Voldemort's ultimate defeat were to be believed. Although Sirius could not do much to help his godson in his current situation, perhaps others could.

In his room, he rummaged around on the old oak desk in the corner, finding the device for which he had been searching, and activated the old communication mirror he and the other Marauders had created many years ago to keep in touch during the summer. Of course, that had not been the only use to which they had put the mirrors, Sirius thought with a smile—their pranking value had been incalculable.

A moment later, a face appeared in the mirror. "Sirius, so good to see you," the man began, his face lighting up in a friendly smile. "What can I do for you?"

His voice was soft yet melodious and deep; his accent, while present, was understated and almost unnoticeable, unless one was paying attention to it. He was an austere yet handsome sort of man, powerful in his own right and eminently competent, and although they had only been acquaintances for a few months, Sirius already considered him an ally and a potential friend. Sirius had contacted him upon finding the document, and the other man, to his credit, had listened to Sirius' protestations of innocence when even his own countrymen would not. A short visit and a dose of Veritaserum later,

he had also been convinced of Sirius' innocence and had begun to plan for his ultimate exoneration.

However, it was the contents of the documents upon which Sirius had come across which now held Sirius' interest. The documents were important in several ways and his companion had a stake in seeing that they were implemented, not to mention the fact that he felt he owed something to Harry because of his actions the previous year. If they played this right, they could ensure Harry's freedom and perhaps even tweak Fudge's nose in the process.

"J.S., we need to speak—something has come up."

The man was silent for a moment. "I presume your news is not good?"

Sirius snorted. "That's an understatement. Harry was attacked by Dementors today outside his home. We need to accelerate our plans."

J.S.' eyes burned with fury for several moments before he visibly calmed himself. "Your country appears to be making every effort to make Harry's life as difficult and dangerous as possible."

"Agreed. But I believe we can turn this around to our advantage."

"Well, then, I believe you must let me in on your plan," he said with an upturned eyebrow.

Sirius grinned in response and began to lay out the events of the day and his ideas for their response. They spent several hours in earnest conversation, planning, plotting, and determining their course of action. That night, when Sirius finally lay down to rest, his face held a smile—he had done his best to help his godson. It was a good beginning.

In another country, several hundred miles away, a man deactivated his communication mirror and sat back in his high-backed chair, staring unseeing at the desk in front of him. The information Sirius had provided him had changed many things, and although he knew in his heart that what they were about to do was for the best, a part of him wondered if his assessment would be agreed upon by other

parties. After all, some of those others would have to bear the major portion of the consequences of his actions—not himself.

Sighing, he leaned forward and rested his chin in his hand, brooding over the unfairness of the world. The temptation to simply write the whole situation off as a purely British problem was there, but he knew that to take such a myopic stance would do more harm than good in the end. The current future in the beleaguered country was bleak with a newly-reconstituted Voldemort running amuck and the Ministry doing little to prepare for a protracted fight. No, the future of England and perhaps the whole world lay with one young man, a man he had just pledged to help, whether it was deemed his responsibility or not.

Then of course there was the personal debt he owed Harry Potter, one which J.S. was not about to forget or conveniently push under the carpet. He owed Harry Potter—owed him his every effort and entire ability to protect.

Knowing there was really no other choice, J.S. sighed and called for his house-elf assistant. There was much to be accomplished.

## Chapter 1 - Surprising Developments

Some days, it just did not pay to even get out of bed. Unfortunately, if your name happened to be Harry Potter, the above maxim was uncomfortably close to being the story of your life.

On this particular day, it was as yet unproven as to whether it would end up becoming a day to forget, but he had seen enough in his short life to know enough to never discount just how bad a day could get without seeing it through to its conclusion.

His morose thoughts and the knowledge of just how ridiculous he was being caused a bubble of laughter to escape from Harry's throat, catching the attention of his two companions, both of whom, he was certain, would berate him for his overly cynical thoughts if they were to ever learn of them. Or at least, Hermione would—Ron would likely agree with him before muttering under his breath about the unfairness of life, something with which Harry privately agreed. But though Hermione would undoubtedly be correct in her assessment of his gloomy thoughts, Harry knew there was one inescapable truth about his life—sometimes it just sucked to be Harry Potter.

"Harry, I hardly think it's time for lightheartedness," Hermione scolded. Although her words were severe, the light of compassion lit up her voice, reminding Harry again how fortunate he was to have her friendship.

"Sorry, Hermione," he responded, trying—somewhat unsuccessfully, he thought—to appear contrite, "but something struck me as funny. If I don't laugh, I'll probably cry, so laughing at this point is better, don't you think?"

Her gaze softened, and she gazed at him with a fondness clearly visible in her eyes.

"What are you going on about, mate?" Ron demanded peevishly, his eyes moving back and forth between his friends.

Harry shrugged. "What would you do, Ron? I have to go on display this morning and may never be back to the magical world. Should I cry and throw a tantrum, or should I laugh? Sorry, but I prefer to laugh—I may go crazy otherwise."



"Don't talk like that, Harry," Ron muttered. "You aren't going to be expelled."

Hermione was clearly agitated. "Ron's right, Harry. Dumbledore would never allow it."

Although her words appeared calm and confident, there was an underlying tension evident in her voice—knowing Hermione as he did, Harry knew she was uncertain and deeply concerned for his welfare while trying to present a brave face. A swell of affection for the young witch filled him as he gazed at her warmly wondering what he had possibly done right to deserve such a steadfast friend. Without her, he thought he would be lost to the vagaries and injustices of the world.

Hermione blushed and looked down, clearly uncomfortable with his scrutiny, though he was certain a half smile had been plastered on her face the entire time. Glancing over at Ron, Harry lowered his gaze to the floor immediately at the suspicious glare his friend favored him with. Harry knew that Ron had begun to fancy Hermione, and since he had arrived at Grimmauld place nearly ten days before, Ron had taken to watching them closely, alert for any signs of affection beyond mere friendship.

Ron was his best male friend, and closest comrade, closer even than Hermione, largely, he thought, due to their status as roommates and their ability to relate to one another as boys. However, Harry had always understood his friend sometimes had the tendency to be somewhat of a fair-weather friend, prone to occasional fits of jealousy, while at the same time being possessive of his friendship with Harry and Hermione.

To be fair to Ron, Harry was well aware that it could not be easy to live in his shadow and he knew that at times Ron felt almost stifled being known as the best friend to the Boy-Who-Lived—not to mention younger brother to some truly exceptional wizards—rather than to being known based on who he was. However, although Ron certainly had his issues, as anyone else, for the most part he had been a good friend and staunch companion, and he certainly could not be accused of cowardice. The times he had willingly followed Harry into danger—from the Philosopher's stone incident in their first year, to the Acromantulas and Chamber of Secrets in their second—

Ron had been a steady and supportive friend, and co-conspirator in the adventures they had had.

However, in the matter of Hermione, Harry knew he and Ron would be at odds, should Harry ever decide he fancied his closest female friend. Harry understood, as he suspected Ron still did not, that Ron would consider Hermione his territory due to his expressing interest in her first—the fact that he had not in actuality expressed that interest to the young woman in question would ultimately have no bearing on the matter in his own mind. It was not a failing in Ron, per se, but more simply the way his best friend's mind worked, inasmuch as Harry had insight into the workings of Ron's mind.

As for Harry's feelings on the matter of his best female friend—they were confused and not easily understood, even, he suspected, if he had given the matter a great deal of thought, which he had not. What Harry did know, was that he esteemed Hermione beyond anyone else of his acquaintance; she was his truest friend—the one who had stood by him in everything which had happened to him since his arrival in the magical world, the one upon whom he could always count. Not even Ron could not make that claim.

Perhaps the fact that Harry was incapable of deciphering his own feelings was not to be wondered at due to his upbringing in the Dursley household. While Harry was aware of Hermione and understood she was growing from the bushy-haired, plain girl of her youth into an attractive young woman, he was not certain how he should feel about her, being so completely ill-prepared to judge his own feelings. Understanding her feelings was equally difficult, although the way she had snuck glances at him since his arrival, particularly when she thought he was not looking—coupled with her blush from moments earlier—seemed to indicate to Harry's inexperienced eye that he was not the only one to wonder at the state of their relationship.

But then again, knowing there was an insane and recently reincorporated madman out for his blood, could he subject Hermione to becoming an even larger target than she already was by openly declaring feelings for her?

Harry snorted to himself, well aware of the tongue lashing he would receive from her if she was ever aware of his thoughts. Although Hermione would undoubtedly appreciate his willingness and

determination to protect her, she would not take kindly to him making decisions for her without her knowledge and consent. He could well imagine her indignation, considering it was their hearts he was reflecting on—although the subject had never been broached, he thought he knew her well enough to know she would believe the risk of openly declaring romantic feelings worth taking in order to be happy.

"Harry," a hesitant voice startled him out of his reverie. "Are you all right?"

His eyes coming back into focus, he peered back at his friends, aware of the concerned looks which adorned both of their faces. It hit him suddenly, that he had been silent for some time.

Smiling, he nodded to them and started putting on his sneakers. "I'm fine, Hermione. I'm just worried about the hearing."

"You don't have to worry, Harry," Ron said with some confidence. "Dumbledore will take care of everything. You'll see."

"Thanks, Ron, I hope you're right. I'm trying to remain positive, but it's tough some times. Fudge has been out to get me ever since the tournament—looks like he's found his chance."

Glancing up, Harry recognized the encouraging looks on both his friends' faces. He sighed, aware his overly pessimistic outlook on life was not doing him any good, and was simultaneously worrying his friends. Consciously, he decided it was time to let his worries go and accept what was to come.

But whatever was to come, if Fudge was to succeed in his campaign to discredit and remove Harry from the wizarding world, Harry promised himself it would not come without a fight. If Fudge wanted to expel him, he would not do so without Harry standing up for himself. If he had been taught one thing during his fifteen years of life, it was to never turn your back on a bully. And that was what Fudge essentially was.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley entered the foyer of the dirty and worn-down house, indicating to Harry it was time. Nodding, Harry said a last goodbye to his friends, taking in Hermione's worried frown and Ron's attempt to be brave and positive, thanking them

both for their friendship, and promising to see them once again when this was all over. For now, he was bound for the Ministry and his destiny.

Later, Harry could only say he could not remember much of the journey to the Ministry building on that fateful day. He could vaguely recall heading down the steps of the old house to a car waiting out front and stepping into said vehicle, but then he could recall nothing until they had arrived at the old phone booth which provided the entrance to the Ministry itself. Had he been thinking clearly of what was happening at the time, he would have wondered why they were going through the bother of driving in one of the Ministry's cars to the trial rather than using the Floo system. Although he was told later that though it would have been possible for Mr. Weasley as an employee of the Ministry to bring him in that way, it was normal procedure for visitors to enter via the phone booth. That, and the desire to spare Harry due to his well-known aversion to Floo travel, prompted the longer journey by car. It also had the added benefit of allowing him to get his thoughts in order. However, on this day, none of this crossed Harry's mind.

No, his mind was engaged in thoughts of what might happen this day and his rebellious subconscious insisted on replaying all the possible scenarios of what a conviction could mean to him, real or imagined. And although Harry had thought somewhat morosely that very morning just how much trouble he had had, not only since his reentry into this world but also throughout his whole life because of its very existence, he realized that he now thought of himself—identified himself—by his status as a wizard. Now, with the reality of being forcibly removed and bound against ever doing magic again, he knew he had no desire to leave this world, regardless of the trouble it posed to him or the dangers it represented. It was now his life—he wanted nothing more than to be allowed to continue to live it.

Besides, he could not leave Ron and Hermione behind now—their friendship and trust meant too much to him to leave them in a world which could soon be dominated by a megalomaniac. Voldemort had seen fit to target him all his life and to Harry that meant the dark wizard believed Harry to be a threat to his vision. If he was such a threat, Harry was determined to be as much of a thorn in Voldemort's side as he possibly could. This in turn strengthened his resolve to meet Fudge head on and challenge him—he would not be

meek and vulnerable before the Minister. No, Fudge would not find a pliable child in Harry Potter.

Such thoughts were not to be dwelt upon, however, as after a short journey through the streets of London, they arrived at the entrance to the Ministry and had soon entered the building by its somewhat unorthodox entrance.

Unfortunately for Harry, who would have preferred a low-key arrival and journey to the courtroom, the Ministry Atrium was overflowing that day, partially because it was a regular business day for the wizarding government, but also, he suspected, because of the sensational aspect of the trial to be held. Upon entering the Atrium, the noise level in the crowded room suddenly decreased, and countless heads swiveled in his direction, almost as one, a fanciful part of him whispered. Then the soft whispering began, and he saw more than one gesture in his direction. The atmosphere was difficult for the young man to make out, and although the crowd in general did not seem overly hostile, they were not overly friendly either.

He suspected the large crowd had something to do with the nature of the coming trial. Harry had not been idle during the past week—he had done some research on the matter (with Hermione's judicious assistance) and had learned that no one who had been charged with underage use of magic had ever been tried in an open court before the entire Wizengamot. No, this was Fudge's big chance to humble and neutralize the famous Boy-Who-Lived while setting himself up as the sole voice of reason and champion of the people. Harry only wanted to see the bastard go up against Voldemort himself; the Minister would not last more than a few moments against the dark wizard before facing utter defeat, or worse.

Following his best friend's father, Harry made his way to the stairs which would take them down to the tenth level and the courtroom, all the while his cheeks flaming due to the unwanted attention. It was crystal clear to him—he was big news in the wizarding world, and his trial was drawing a lot of interest. He sensed that it was up to him to take the initiative and show himself in the best possible light. If he could show himself to be the hero these people all hoped him to be—especially with Voldemort's recent return—he suspected the atmosphere of the recently exited Atrium would change into a more

positive one for him. Perhaps the idiot Fudge could even be put on the defensive for a change. One could only hope.

Of course, this presupposed Harry could come up with something which would not only save his hide, but also prove sufficiently inspiring to capture the imagination of the masses. Unfortunately, he would not be flying on his broom, pursued by an angry dragon, or fighting a massive basilisk—this fight would have to be won with words. He wished Hermione were here; she was the one with the gift for words.

They emerged from the stairwell and made their way down the long hall. Their progress down the hall went largely unnoticed by Harry, intent as he was on his own problems. At length, as they progressed toward Harry's destiny, he noticed a tall, austere sort of man who was regarding them intently as they made their way toward the courtroom. As they drew near, he approached them, a kindly expression coming over his face.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, I presume."

Although Harry was unsurprised the man seemed to know him (Was there anyone who did not after all?), but everyone else had been content to do no more than watch from a distance and whisper. In his experience, there were many Lockharts in the world—those who wished to know him for their own purposes and agendas.

Deciding it was better to be distant for the moment, he responded cautiously. "Yes? Can I help you?"

The man chuckled. "No, young Harry, I just thought I would say hello before you enter the courtroom."

Harry looked past the man at the open door, leading to courtroom number ten, which loomed in the distance. It seemed to mock him, beckoning him toward his destiny and sudden doom—taunting him with his own fears.

Shaking off his fanciful thoughts, Harry focused his attention back on the newcomer, who was even now watching him with an expression of sympathy.

"It's a little overwhelming, is it not?"

For the first time, Harry noticed the slight accent in the man's speech—it was not blatant, nor did it make him difficult to understand. Although he had no knowledge of this man—as Arthur did not, it appeared, given his curious reaction to the man and his lack of greeting—he was the type that inspired confidence and exuded competence.

"Just a little..." Harry finally muttered in response.

The man nodded sagely. "Although it seems bleak, just remember to keep your head up. We can't necessarily pick our circumstances, but we can choose the manner in which we react and conduct ourselves. Sometimes, that is more important in the long run—our behavior in trying circumstances is a better indicator of our character than when we are in our comfort zone. Remember that as you stand in front of these fops."

His last words were spoken with a wry smile and a gesture toward Minister Fudge, who was making his way into the courtroom.

Grateful for the kind words, Harry nodded and regarded the mysterious man. "I'm sorry, sir, but do I know you?"

"No, although I do know of you." At Harry's grimace, he once again chuckled and slapped Harry on the shoulder. "I guess that's not exactly a surprise, now is it? Just remember, you have people who are on your side—those who will fight for you. Don't let them intimidate you and try to isolate you."

Harry nodded, thinking about what the man had told him. He knew he had good friends—Hermione and Ron were the best, Dumbledore and the other professors had always looked out for him, and it was amazing how close he and Sirius had become in such a short time. Somehow he would get through the day and become stronger for it.

Thank you, Mr...."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Harry," the man responded. "I'm certain we will see more of one another in the very near future."

With that, Harry found his hand firmly shaken, after which the man departed, entering a door to the side of the main entrance to the courtroom. He looked in askance at Mr. Weasley and noted a slightly bemused expression on the other man's face. As this was somewhat normal for his best friend's father, Harry simply shook his head, assuming Mr. Weasley had no more idea of the new acquaintance's identity than Harry did.

Gathering himself, Harry and his escort crossed the final distance to the courtroom entrance and paused before the open door.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley began, "you know we're all behind you. Don't worry about a thing."

Thanking his host for his assistance, Harry took a deep breath and entered the courtroom.

He found himself in a semi-circular room, with a floor that was roughly the size of the Gryffindor common room at Hogwarts. On three sides, benches rose up along the walls approximately ten levels high; to his back, a raised gallery stood above the entrance to the courtroom. The benches along the walls were filled with members of the Wizengamot, most of whom were stern looking elderly witches and wizards. Although it was difficult to get a true reading of the mood of the legislative body, Harry could tell that many were not happy to be there—whether that was due to indifference, disapproval of Fudge's actions, or enmity to himself, he could not tell. Turning back in the direction from which he had just entered, Harry gazed up at the gallery, which was packed with onlookers, and caught the eye of the man he had just met outside the courtroom, who gave him a cheery salute. Grinning in response, he turned back to Minister Fudge, who was now regarding him with an expression of fury and the utmost disdain.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Potter," he said between clenched teeth, indicating the hard wooden chair which stood in the center of the room, facing away from the door. "We are ready to begin these proceedings."

Suddenly worried, Harry peered about the room, looking for the telltale garish robes of his Headmaster. Not seeing him among the members of the Wizengamot, he looked up at the Minister, who was regarding him impatiently.



"Excuse me, Minister—I had understood Headmaster Dumbledore was to be here."

Fudge's face lit up with a cruel, triumphant smile. "It seems your Headmaster has not seen fit to bother himself with the deeds of a mere student. In cases of such contempt being shown to the Wizengamot, we must continue in his absence."

Shivering at the vindictive glee which was fairly dripping from the Minister's voice, Harry glanced back at the door and then at the face of his supporter, who regarded him steadily, lending him courage and the belief that all would be well. Taking a deep breath, Harry gathered his courage and sat in the hard chair, his back straight and his head held high. He was determined to show Fudge that he was not about to be intimidated.

A feral grin met his response, as restraints suddenly shot out of the arms and legs of the chair, binding him and holding him immobile. The Minister smirked in triumph at his shock, as he called the Wizengamot to order.

"Order in the courtroom!" he shouted, banging his gavel on the desk at which he sat.

As the room quieted, he glanced around the room and spoke again. "I call this trial of underage magic use for one Harry James Potter in session." He sneered at Harry as he continued. "The defendant is accused of using magic in the presence of Muggles and in violation of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. The truth of this charge, as well as the lies of said defendant, shall be brought to light and shall be acted upon accordingly."

"Is that so, Cornelius?" a voice rang out from behind Harry.

Harry twisted his head as far as he was able due to the restraints and witnessed the dramatic entrance of his Headmaster, grinning as the amused twinkling of Dumbledore's eyes was directed at him. The grandfatherly old man looked his immaculate best today, from his long flowing gray robes to his long white beard, which had been combed and tied down with his usual gold chain. Although his eyes twinkled when he looked at his young charge, Harry could tell the Headmaster was not amused—he fairly radiated power and his gaze

on the assembled Wizengamot members was not only stern, but also disapproving in the extreme.

Walking up to Harry's chair, he took his position along his side and continued. "I suppose I should not be surprised the location and time of this... hearing was changed without prior notice." His harsh tone left no doubt as to his opinion of the trial. "If one did not know better, Minister, one would think it was deliberately done to deprive Mr. Potter of his right to defend himself before this noble body."

Fudge's eyes tightened momentarily before he sniffed in disdain. "The Wizengamot can hardly be held responsible if you cannot take the trouble to keep up with the doings of the body you lead, Dumbledore."

Raising one eyebrow, Dumbledore's gaze bored into the Minister, making him squirm slightly in his seat. "The memo must have gone missing, Minister. If it were not for some conscientious member of this body, Mr. Potter and I may not have heard of this until after a decision had been rendered. Surely you would not want to be seen as a Minister who presided over a miscarriage of justice for one of your most famous subjects."

Fudge looked on, his face slightly pale at the implications of Dumbledore's speech, while there was an uncomfortable silence as the Wizengamot digested all which had not been said by their leader.

"Be that as it may," Dumbledore continued, "regardless of my opinion of this forum, here we are. I suggest we conclude this farce as quickly as may be so we can all get on with matters which are far more important. As I will be representing Mr. Potter, I yield the floor to you, Minister."

Inside, Harry was elated over the implied dressing down his Headmaster had just given the Minister, although he tried not to let it show on his face. Harry was not a student of wizarding law—far from it—but he knew he was being singled out by a Minister who had refused to see reason and had publicly called him a liar following his testimony after the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. What Dumbledore had said was not only fair, but also just in the context of any wizarding law Harry knew.

"Quite," Fudge responded at length.

The Minister signaled for the prosecution to begin their case, their star witness being the assistant with whom Harry had had communication with twice previously: Mafalda Hopkirk. Harry listened as Fudge prompted her with the information to build the case against him, asking questions to draw out what he obviously considered to be the pertinent facts. He watched and listened carefully, noting the gleeful glances the Minister kept directing at him. Ms. Hopkirk, by contrast, appeared to have nothing against either Harry or Dumbledore; she merely presented the facts of the case as she saw them, embellishing little and only elaborating when prompted directly by the Minister or one of the Wizengamot members. The facts were simple and straightforward: on the morning of August 2, the Ministry tracking devices had detected a large surge of magic which had been traced to Harry's wand. Ms. Hopkirk had initiated standard procedures and dispatched a letter to his residence, informing him of his expulsion from Hogwarts and the actions to be taken by the Ministry in response. However, the order was soon rescinded when Albus Dumbledore had arrived at the Ministry and convinced them to hold a hearing to determine his fate.

This final piece of information had Fudge smirking down at Harry, causing Harry to squirm in his chair.

"Ms. Hopkirk," Fudge began after she had finished her report, "I take it this is not the first time Mr. Potter has used magic improperly?"

"No, Minister. Mr. Potter has been detected using magic on two separate occasions outside of Hogwarts since he began attending."

"There!" Fudge thundered. "The Wizengamot can see the pattern of disobedience and contempt for the laws of our world—contempt which puts us all in danger of discovery by the Muggles! Can anyone possibly say anything in Mr. Potter's defense?"

"Minister, I believe Mr. Potter should be allowed to respond in his defense."

Fudge's beady eyes fixed on Dumbledore, and an unpleasant sneer came over his face. "Ah, yes—we come to the crux of the matter. The esteemed Headmaster of our most distinguished school, who has himself shown a pattern of favoritism for Mr. Potter. Tell the Wizengamot, Headmaster, why it is, that as an official member of

this body, you felt necessary to intervene on Mr. Potter's behalf. Has his stay at Hogwarts been similarly rife with favoritism from your office?"

His insinuation was not lost on the members of the Wizengamot. Harry witnessed dark, contemplative looks on the faces of many watching Wizengamot members. It was a strike, clearly designed to focus attention on his relationship with the Headmaster, rather than the crime being discussed. Dumbledore chose to ignore the insinuation.

"Tell me, Ms. Hopkirk," Dumbledore stated—the woman had been standing quietly, waiting to be addressed or dismissed. "How is it that a letter was dispatched to Mr. Potter's residence so quickly? Standard procedure states that a first offense generates a warning letter immediately, but a second offense requires a review before any response is made."

"Dumbledore, I hardly think this is—"

"But it is relevant, Minister. After all, the reason for this forum is to make certain Mr. Potter is treated the same as any other witch or wizard, and subject to the appropriate action according to our laws. You will answer the question, Ms. Hopkirk."

Her eyes darted to those of the Minister, who was staring at her, his eyes narrowed. Sighing, she glanced back at Dumbledore and responded. "Minister Fudge sent a memo instructing prompt action if Mr. Potter were to be detected using magic."

"Only Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow and peered back at the Minister, who was now looking distinctly uncomfortable. He appeared ready to angrily interrupt the conversation when Dumbledore spoke again.

"In answer to your previous question, Minister, I have always acted in the best interests of those under my charge. I will continue to do so to ensure the safety and well-being of my students. I would do the same for any who I feel are being unfairly singled out—I had thought you already understood this, Minister."

Although Harry did not understand the reference, the tightening of the Minister's eyes told him that he, at least, understood and was not pleased.

"Really, Dumbledore," Fudge snarled in reply, his momentary setback forgotten, "you should cease involving yourself in lost causes such as this—it may eventually damage the mystique of your reputation. Regardless of anything I or anyone else in the government have done in this case, the facts are relevant and irrefutable, as is the punishment."

"Mr. Potter is deserving of the opportunity to respond to his accusers, not only as is his right, but also due to the seriousness of the consequences. Do you, Minister, believe he should be summarily convicted without his explanation, or do you wish to perpetuate the mistakes of the past and convict another innocent man by denying his rights?"

The Minister was practically snarling by this time. "Fine, Dumbledore—make your case! How does Mr. Potter think he can defend his actions in this?"

"Harry? Would you like to respond?"

Feeling the weight of the entire Wizengamot bearing down on him, Harry, nevertheless, screwed up his courage and looked Fudge right in the eyes. "We were attacked by Dementors, sir."

"Dementors, Minister!" Dumbledore boomed. "Mr. Potter was set upon by Dementors on the morning in question. That is what accounts for his use of magic."

"Dementors?" Fudge shrieked. "Are you claiming that a fourth-year student was able to cast a Patronus charm to drive away Dementors? Preposterous!"

Having sat there quietly watching Dumbledore defend him, Harry was struck by the thought that Fudge did not want him to be acquitted—a fact that he knew intellectually. But having it stare him in the face brought the fact into harsh focus.

"I've been able to cast the Patronus charm since my third year!"

"Boy, the Patronus charm is a post-NEWT level spell which can be successfully cast by few in our society. You expect us to believe that you, a mere lad of fifteen, can do what most adults cannot?"

"Give me my wand and let me loose, and I'll show you," Harry snapped in response.

The Minister's eyes narrowed, but before he could say anything further, he was interrupted. A short, pudgy woman, wearing a shade of lurid pink under her dark Wizengamot robes, had raised her hand. "Hem, hem," she cleared her throat before continuing, "I believe the point of whether Mr. Potter can cast a Patronus is academic. After all, the Dementors are under the control of the Ministry and therefore cannot have been in Little Whinging."

Harry immediately disliked the ugly woman—she spoke in a sugary sweet voice, while she simpered and smirked and appeared to make love to the entire gathering. He sensed it was nothing more than an act.

"There you are, Mr. Potter—straight from the Undersecretary. What do you say to that?"

"The Dementors were there—I saw them. Mrs. Figg and my cousin Dudley were there as well."

"Muggles," Fudge spat with derision. "Convenient, don't you think, that your only witnesses cannot actually see Dementors?"

"The effects of a Dementor's presence are well known, Minister," Dumbledore responded. "Simple questioning of the witnesses will establish whether they were affected."

"Rubbish! Your proposed questioning would be nothing more than circumstantial at best. We have proof through the Ministry recording devices of Mr. Potter's use of magic and nothing but his word of the existence of these Dementors to prove otherwise. Why would Dementors be after you, Potter, so far away from Azkaban?"

"I don't know, Minister," Harry responded, the defiance and contempt he felt for the small-minded little man showing in his voice. "I have been attacked by Dementors before, as you well know, when

you decided to station them at Hogwarts in my third year. Maybe they were able to escape somehow, or maybe one of Voldemort's supporters set them on me."

A feral grin lit up the Minister's face even as a wave of gasps at hearing the dark lord's name spoken rippled through the chamber. "Ah, so now we come to the heart of the matter—Mr. Potter's insistence on the reappearance of the Dark Lord. Tell me, Potter, why you are so insistent on proclaiming the impossible? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has been dead these past fourteen years after all... You were there, were you not?"

Harry sat up as straight as he could manage and glared at the Minister. "I'm telling you he's back because it's the truth."

"And I'm telling you it's impossible!" Fudge yelled in response. "Do you think you are some sort of god, that you can return a man dead for over a decade to the land of the living?"

"I did not bring him back, Minister. He was brought back by Peter Pettigrew, who used a dark ritual to return his former master."

"Peter Pettigrew! Another man dead since you were a child! Are there no end to your lies?"

"Minister, it is known that there are ways to tether one's existence to this earth—and ways of bringing one who has accomplished this back. As you well know, I have never believed Voldemort to be gone and given his fear of death and intense self interest, I do not think this belief out of line—he is out there, and now he has been re-embodied, and it is foolishness not to act to protect your people and our very society."

Fudge glared at Dumbledore in disgust. "And yet, you have no proof of these claims other than the word of a young, glory-seeking upstart who seems intent on causing panic in our world."

"The proof exists if you would only look at it!"

"Enough!" Fudge shouted. "I will not listen to the lies of this young man, nor to your attempt to cause panic in these halls! Mr. Potter is a spoiled, indulged little brat who has been toeing your line for far

too long, Dumbledore, and I mean to see his lies brought to an end for the good of our society."

Leaning back in his chair, Fudge smirked at the Headmaster. "I have another theory of Mr. Potter's... experiences. He is attempting to sow fear and discord because his star has waned since he returned to our world—he wishes to recreate his past celebrity and is using his only claim to fame to do so by invoking the name of our greatest enemy. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead, Mr. Potter. You will receive no further adulation from this society for an accident which happened when you were a mere baby!"

"If he is dead, never to return, then why do you fear to speak his name?"

Dumbledore's question echoed out over the room, causing some to glance at the Minister with a certain speculation, while still others looked affronted that anyone would have the audacity to suggest they actually use the dark lord's name. Harry took stock of their reactions, trying to commit them to memory—these were the ones who were at the very least, tacit supporters of Voldemort, if not actual Death Eaters.

"Surely the Minister cannot be afraid of a dead man," Dumbledore continued, causing a swell of noise to break out over the Wizengamot, not to mention a certain amount of snickering. A point had been clearly scored by the Headmaster.

Finally a sputtering Fudge regained control of his voice. "It matters little what you call him, Dumbledore," he spat. "The man is dead, and regardless of what Mr. Potter thinks he saw, he cannot have seen the dark lord. He is obviously lying."

"I'll take Veritaserum!" Harry yelled desperately.

"What?"

"Give me Veritaserum—that will show you I'm telling the truth."

"An excellent suggestion, Minister," Dumbledore chimed in smoothly. "Veritaserum will prove Mr. Potter's claims without a doubt."



"Veritaserum is a valuable substance," Umbridge interrupted in her sickening voice, while Fudge sputtered. "We don't just use it on anyone with a random claim—your case does not qualify, Mr. Potter."

"On the contrary—" Dumbledore began, but was interrupted by a now furious Fudge.

"Bollocks! We will listen to no more of this. It is time for the Wizengamot to deliberate and determine the results of this hearing."

Harry was uncertain how it would play out—Dumbledore had obviously scored significant points with the Wizengamot, but would it be enough? Harry had glanced up at the Headmaster, fearful of the outcome, when he heard a strong voice from the gallery.

By this time, J.S. had heard enough—the British Minister was intent on petulantly getting his way and was clearly not interested in the truth. It was time to repay Sirius' trust in him and cast the die which would change the lives of his family.

"Enough, Minister!"

Ignoring the look of astonishment on the face of the British Minister, J.S. rose from his chair and vaulted the bar which separated the spectator gallery from the rest of the amphitheater. He quickly strode down the stairs to the floor, and moved toward the detested chair in which the young man he had come to help still sat regarding him, a look of shock, mingled with hope, adorning his features.

Arriving in the middle of the floor, J.S. scowled at the chair which held Harry captive and flicked his wrist, releasing his bonds. Uncertainly, Harry glanced up at his benefactor, grinning tentatively in response to the welcoming smile J.S. gave him.

"Stand up and face your accusers, Harry. That chair was designed to remove a person's free will and dignity, and I will not have you spend any further time in it."

J.S. just had enough time to exchange a glance, accompanied by a raised eyebrow, with the Headmaster before Fudge finally recovered. His voice rang out through the courtroom.

"Ambassador! What is the meaning of this?"

Sneering at the nearly apoplectic Minister, J.S. helped a stunned-looking Harry Potter to his feet before turning to address the young man's accusers.

"This hearing is a farce, Minister. I will not allow you to continue with this character assassination, this... kangaroo court any longer. You have no interest in knowing the truth of Harry's actions, only in pushing your agenda of denial and your destructive and narrow-minded Pureblood bigotry. This young man will not be sacrificed to further your career!"

"How dare you! By what authority do you interrupt our proceedings?"

"By the authority of the ICW!"

His statement apparently caught Fudge off guard, as the man's tongue was stilled momentarily, allowing J.S. to continue his assault.

"With the assistance of the Supreme Mugwump," he nodded in Dumbledore's direction, "an emergency session of the ICW was convened this morning. With an overwhelming majority, the ICW has voted to commend young Harry Potter for his actions, not only during the attack on him and his cousin, but also during the recently completed tournament."

"And what authority does the ICW have here in England?" Fudge sneered in response.

But though the Minister attempted to appear confident and unmoved by the news, J.S. could tell his words were a little less forceful, his manner slightly less secure. The approval and recommendation of the ICW was no small matter, not even to the most powerful among them—to fall afoul of the international wizarding body was not without political and personal risk, as many had found to their detriment.

"Obviously, no legal authority," J.S. responded, twisting the knife slightly. "My dear Minister Fudge, you must study international wizarding law further if you are concerned about that."

The jibe did not go unnoticed and Fudge scowled in response. The members of the Wizengamot reacted differently, as those in direct opposition could be seen to be smirking in his direction, while others appeared to have varying looks of contemplation, understanding, and even apprehension.

"The ICW cannot intervene directly in an affair which is so obviously an internal British matter," he continued, making certain the Minister and his entire Wizengamot understood exactly what he was saying. "However, young Mr. Potter is a person of interest to the wizarding world as a whole, not only for surviving an attack by one of the most feared dark lords of any age, but also because of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, among his other exploits. Mr. Potter, it appears your adventures have gained you much notoriety and fame beyond the boundaries of England, above and beyond what happened when he attacked you all those years ago. The offers of refuge came from many different countries, including my own."

J.S. almost laughed at Harry's look of incomprehension and consternation—he was obviously a private young man who did not appreciate his fame. Deciding he would have to watch closely—Harry appeared as if he did not fully understand what was happening, and if that was the case, he would need to be educated, not only in the ways of the wizarding world, but also in how the international world worked—J.S. turned his attention back to Fudge, curious to see how the Minister would react to the blows his case had taken that morning.

The Minister was glaring ferociously down at the accused, no doubt trying to determine how to resurrect his case. J.S. stared back at the Minister, allowing the gleam of dislike and disgust to enter his eyes. Fudge's eyes narrowed in response—it was obvious to J.S. that he had made himself an implacable (although he expected somewhat ineffectual) enemy this day. Yet, everything he had heard about Harry and the Dark Lord's unhealthy interest in the young man told him it was worth it. Harry Potter would be a leader in the fight against Voldemort—J.S. was certain of it.

"The ICW is irrelevant!" Fudge finally responded, making one last gasp to save his case. "Mr. Potter has broken the law—international law I might add—and we are duty-bound as a society to ensure the secrecy of our world is upheld."

"Then instruct your Aurors to prepare the Veritaserum," J.S. responded. "Mr. Potter has already agreed to its use."

It was the short, pudgy, pink woman who responded. "The use of Veritaserum—"

"—is condoned in the use of all trials to determine the truthfulness of an accused. Really, Madam, I should think that as a member of this august body, you would understand the laws of your own country."

She visibly bristled at his comments, causing J.S. to wonder why she was so adamant in her support of Fudge in this matter. It would bear looking in to.

"The matter is still clear!" Her sickeningly sweet voice now held a hint of shrillness. "The statute was broken, and Mr. Potter has admitted to it."

"If I may," Dumbledore intervened for the first time since J.S. had spoken up, "there is a reason for the term 'reasonable' in the statute. Surely defending himself against Dementors would be considered justified to any right-minded wizard or witch. The use of Veritaserum would verify the presence of Dementors on that morning."

"Unless he's delusional!" Fudge snapped, finally finding his voice again.

"Then the testimonies of the witnesses will also be necessary," Dumbledore responded with aplomb. "Unless you feel they were all delusional for some inexplicable reason."

His sarcasm was not lost on the members of the Wizengamot. J.S. could almost feel the tide of opinion turning against the Minister and decided it was time to finish the debate.

"Minister, with what I have heard this morning, it would almost appear to me as though you hold a personal vendetta against this young man, although for what reason I must admit to being at a loss. I have had only one brief conversation with Mr. Potter, yet I can state without reservation that he seems like a nice, bright lad, one who has experienced hardship in his life due to no fault of his own. Given his stature as hero to the British wizarding people, do you really want to go down as the Minister who has driven one of your

most famous heroes away from England forever? How could your people have possibly turned on Harry so quickly? Has the English wizarding world even been told the truth about Mr. Potter?"

That more than anything else received Fudge's—and the entire Wizengamot's—attention. J.S. was aware that Fudge could have portrayed Harry in any manner he pleased and gotten away with it, as long as he controlled the flow of information and kept public opinion firmly on his side. Now, with his arguments in ruins, and his bias and personal grudge against the young boy all but proven in the aftermath of these proceedings—which were being followed across the British Wizarding Wireless by most of the country, unless J.S. missed his guess—it would be political suicide for Fudge to continue to push for conviction and punishment.

J.S.' grin was practically predatory. "Ah, I see that has gotten your attention. But be that as it may, I will not allow the exploitation of young Harry Potter to continue any longer."

The looks of confusion and apprehension on more than one face would be almost comical if J.S. was not so deadly serious.

"Because the English wizarding world cannot be trusted with Mr. Potter's welfare, I fear I must take steps to ensure he is never again treated in this manner. I have recently become aware of the existence of a document signed by my father and Mr. Potter's grandfather more than fifty years ago, a document which allows me to be of some use to the young man. As I have the agreement of his guardian, I am hereby invoking a marriage contract between Mr. Potter and my eldest daughter. So mote it be!"

## Chapter 2 – The Marriage Contract

The blunt declaration caused the courtroom to descend into stunned silence.

Whether the rest of the courtroom was simply surprised, shocked into silence by the brashness of the declaration, or aghast at the possibility of seeing their "national hero" (a title which still had the power to cause Harry to shake his head in disbelief, given the shots he had absorbed from those same people) betrothed to a foreign witch, it was impossible to say. Although he certainly caught the expressions of the rest of the room, Harry was, understandably, concerned with his own questions.

How could this have happened? What did this stranger mean by claiming a marriage contract to some witch he had never met? Were such archaic traditions still followed in the magical world?

To this last question, Harry was forced to admit, somewhat ruefully, that the possibility for such antiquated traditions were not only possible, but given the things he had seen and experienced since he had discovered the magical world, he was not surprised to learn they still existed.

Harry Potter had never given much thought to his future and—other than a few idle hours, wiled away in which he had indulged himself in the contemplation of the various females of his acquaintance—had certainly never given serious consideration to the question of who would ultimately become Mrs. Potter. The thought of marriage not only had never really occurred to him, but it was also something which consciously or not, he had considered unappealing early in his life, no doubt largely due to the only example he had ever witnessed: the married life of his aunt and uncle. They had always, in his memory, been largely argumentative, and he could never remember any instances of spousal felicity or shows of affection. In fact, other than their common goal of making him feel worthless and consigning him to a miserable existence, they had never actually shown any common goals or interests, making him wonder why they had married in the first place.

His only other example was slightly better in execution, as the Weasley parents were at least friendly with each other and focused on their family and the importance that family in their lives. It was a

different portrait to be certain, but hardly a more reassuring one to Harry's mind—after all, although they were certainly more harmonious than his aunt and uncle, it was also obvious who was in charge of the relationship. Harry hesitated at labeling Mrs. Weasley as loud and overbearing—she had been remarkably kind toward him in the time he had known her—but he knew she was a strong-willed woman, used to getting her own way, whereas her husband was generally content to coast along, allowing her to put herself forward, while he allowed himself to slip into more of a support role. Harry was very fond of the Weasleys—he was simply not excited about emulating their relationship.

So with Harry's examples of marital felicity, it was hardly to be wondered at the fact that young Harry was not enamored of the thought of marriage but had also—perhaps subconsciously—wondered if finding a wife was even worth it at all.

And now he was all but engaged to be married, without his consent... and to some witch he had never met. And furthermore, he did not even know her name! How was he supposed to feel when confronted with such a situation? Was there any way out of it? Was this man another fortune seeker, bent on a connection with the infamous Boy-Who-Lived? Or was he playing some other game?

Then again, this stranger must have some reason for not only agreeing to enact such a scheme (with Sirius' help no less!) but also accepting this marriage contract, given Harry's well-documented troubles with the aforementioned insane and powerful wizard. A fortune seeker would have to be unbalanced to consider an alliance in the face of such danger.

Harry did not know what to think.

Just as the inevitable pandemonium began, Harry noticed the stranger peering at him with a kindly expression on his face; the action worked to reassure Harry somewhat that—whatever the man's reasoning was for this interference—his reasons for holding up this marriage contract were not intended to be detrimental to Harry's future. Given all that was going on in his life, the thought was comforting. Then again, appearances could be deceiving.

"Is anything wrong, Harry?" the man asked in a quiet voice, ignoring the rising noise around them.

"Marriage contract?" Harry managed to squeak out.

J.S. shrugged. "Not exactly common any longer, but certainly not out of the ordinary either. Surely you had some indication such a thing was possible."

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said with a shake of his head, "I didn't know. I've been raised by Muggles, and sometimes I'm still surprised by some of the old-fashioned things in the wizarding world..."

Frowning at Harry's comment, J.S. stared at him in deep contemplation, causing Harry to become self conscious. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, the nervous energy escaping despite his best efforts to keep it controlled.

"It's all right, Harry," J.S. responded, his tone soothing and a smile once more on his face. "I was not aware of your lack of knowledge. We will have to work on your education once we are away from this place."

"Is there any way out of it?" Harry blurted, realizing immediately it was the wrong thing to say when a dark expression came over J.S.' face.

"I'm sorry," Harry said somewhat nervously, not wanting to offend his benefactor. "This is just all so... new to me. I mean... I've never thought..."

"I don't even know your daughter," he finished, somewhat lamely, after a short pause.

J.S. chuckled quietly, his amusement immediately replacing his momentary displeasure. "Do not worry; I am not offended. I can see we have much to discuss, my young friend, and you have much to learn."

At Harry's nod of agreement, J.S. reached out and grasped his shoulder, squeezing it slightly in a comforting gesture. "As for not knowing my daughter, I assure you, she is not unknown to you."

Harry regarded him uncertainly, wondering who he could possibly mean.



"My apologies, young Mr. Potter; allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jean-Sebastian Delacour, French Ambassador to the International Confederation of Wizards. This marriage contract engages you to my daughter, Fleur, with whom I believe you are acquainted through the Tri-Wizard Tournament last year at Hogwarts."

"ORDER!"

At that moment they were interrupted by Minister Fudge, who was banging his gavel on the desk in front of him, yelling for the Wizengamot to come to order. But Harry, shocked as he was by the suddenly revealed identity of his mysterious benefactor and his newly betrothed, heard none of it.

Fleur Delacour? Is that who I'm engaged to?

Thoughts whirled around in his head, flitting from images of a beautiful young woman entering the great hall of Hogwarts for the first time and drawing the eyes of every young man (and many not so young) to a bedraggled Fleur freshly emerged from the cold of the lake, hugging him tightly in thanks for rescuing her sister. That was who he was now tied to by this damnable contract?

Unable to wrap his head around the thought, Harry forced himself to calm and think about the situation rationally. He considered his almost nonexistent acquaintance with the young French Veela. He had thought about asking Fleur to the Yule Ball the previous year during the tournament, but who had not? Daydreams of appearing at the event on the arm of the most beautiful young woman any of them had ever seen had filled the fantasies of most of the boys at his school. But whereas Ron had forgotten she was far above any of them, Harry had confined his thoughts to the realm of fantasy, never allowing himself to consider that she might actually say yes.

Still... Now he thought about it, although he still considered her far above him in terms of beauty and desirability, the example of Ron was certainly not one which fit the situation. After all, as the story went, Ron had blurted his request in the middle of a crowded room and then run off in fear—to the best of Harry's knowledge, she had never actually made a response. It was possible, however unlikely, that she might have accepted Ron's proposal. After all, he had no

knowledge of when Roger Davies had actually asked her to the ball, but if her expression during the event had been any indication, his continual fawning on her had likely been aggravating... and certainly not much worse than she would have experienced with Ron.

Which brought another thought to his consciousness—did he have any real indication that she actually thought herself above those around her? She had been somewhat cold and distant when she had first appeared at the school, and she had acted snooty when he had appeared in the anteroom after the goblet incident, but that was all he had to base his thoughts of her arrogance upon. After all, people at his school thought him to be a spoiled pampered prince, glory seeker, and (since the incident in the graveyard) a delusional liar, something he liked to think was not true, although certain events in his past had led him to question his own sanity on occasion. Was her situation any different from his? Perhaps the popular perception of Miss Delacour was not the reality. He would have to watch and observe before making any judgments, something which, he admitted to himself, he had not done in the past.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Harry made an effort to concentrate more on what was occurring around him.

"You really have no choice, Minister," J.S. was saying, glaring at the Minister through narrowed eyes. "International law in this instance is very clear—since both Mr. Potter's guardian and I have agreed on the execution of the marriage contract, it is in force, regardless of the wishes of the British Ministry."

An incoherent sputtering issued from Fudge's mouth, causing J.S. to smirk in response and Harry to wonder at the man who had managed to render the loquacious Minister speechless.

"But you can't..." Fudge finally got out through his rage and indignation. "We can't have one of our most famous citizens married to a... a... foreigner!"

"This same citizen you were prepared to lynch without bothering to learn the truth?"

Fudge could have nothing to say to that statement.

"And Minister, I will assume you have no other objections to my daughter's suitability as the wife to Mr. Potter."

This last was said with a hard core of steel evident in J.S.' voice, and although Harry did not quite understand the reference, it was not lost on Fudge or the rest of the Wizengamot. There were more than a few scowls, thoughtful looks, and nods of approval from the assembled, giving Harry no further clue as to what was being discussed.

"As I said, regardless of the British Ministry's position on the subject, Mr. Potter is now legally and magically bound by contract, agreed to by our ancestors and enacted by myself and his guardian, to marry my daughter. I suggest you become used to that fact, as it will not change."

Fudge appeared as though he wished to make further objections, but J.S. did not allow it, instead speaking right over the Minister's incoherent stammering. "In addition, as Harry is still underage, I will be assuming his guardianship until he either becomes of age, or his true guardian steps forward to resume his position."

"Again, this is non-negotiable and well within the bounds of the law," he continued when it looked like Fudge was about to object yet again. "Of course, if the English wizarding government is hell bent on expelling Mr. Potter from Hogwarts, I am certain a place can be found for him at Beauxbatons—after all, his betrothed still attends the premier French school, and I'm certain they would be happy to accept such a high profile addition to their student roster."

For a moment, Harry almost thought Fudge's eyes would pop out of his sockets as he stared at J.S. Although not especially versed in the art of politics, even Harry understood this reference—his arguments in shambles politically, Fudge had no choice but to back away from his stance. Further, if he was perceived as the reason a well-known and almost revered citizen was driven from Hogwarts, his political career would be ruined. Harry could almost see Fudge's political life flashing before his eyes, causing his lips to rise in sardonic amusement. Harry had certainly never considered politics to be an enjoyable or even interesting profession, but at that moment he had to admit that the thrill of shredding the enemy's arguments and causing him to retreat in disarray was strangely appealing.

"I assure you, ambassador, enrolling Mr. Potter in Beauxbatons will be unnecessary," an old, distinguished woman with steel gray hair and an absolutely enormous feathered hat spoke up from the lowest row of the Wizengamot. "Though the procedure of this hearing was unusual in the extreme, the intent of this body was merely to get to the bottom of the matter, regardless of what... others have led you to believe."

J.S. nodded his head in response. "I expect nothing less, honored member."

"Minister," the woman continued, "I move that the letter of the law has been met in this instance and that the charges against Mr. Potter be dropped. Of course, if you wish it to avoid all appearance of favoritism, we can administer Veritaserum and call in the other witnesses."

"Or I can cast my Patronus for you, if you'd like," Harry muttered, coloring when he realized his sarcastic comment had been clearly heard by the majority of the Wizengamot, including the elderly lady. She favored him with a smirk and rolled her eyes in Fudge's direction.

Fudge, though, was not amused and scowled at him, ignoring the chorus of laughter which met Harry's irreverent statement.

"Did you wish to take Mr. Potter up on his offer, Minister?" Dumbledore interjected. His eyes were twinkling madly at his student, and he was clearly enjoying Harry's outburst and his somewhat impudent manner.

Apparently deciding it was best ignore the jibe, Fudge stared down at Harry imperiously as though wishing the young man would say something further to injure his reputation. This time, Harry stayed silent, aware that his cheeky outburst had been forgiven once but would not be a second time.

At length, Fudge raised his chin in a snooty gesture. "Very well," he stated, in a haughty tone. "It appears as though the Wizengamot has decided and further debating on the issue is futile. We will recognize Madam Longbottom's motion and drop all charges against Mr. Harry Potter. You are free to go, young man, but I must stress in

the most serious manner that the Statute of Secrecy is not to be taken lightly."

The tension he had felt since the incident was immediately released, and Harry slumped slightly in relief. He was not to be expelled and kicked out of the wizarding world! The thought of seeing his friends again and laughing about everything which had happened caused him to grin with delight. He smiled at the assembled Wizengamot and stated, none too coherently, that he understood and would avoid the use of magic unless absolutely necessary.

J.S., it appeared, was not so easily appeased, if the stern and disapproving expression on his face was any indication. Fudge had apparently noticed J.S.' expression as well, and he glared down at the man with open hostility.

"If that is all—" he began, only to be cut off.

"As it turns out, there is something else," J.S. rejoined, his voice flat and unfriendly. "It has not escaped my attention that my new ward has been vilified in not only in your national newspaper," the word was spat out with some disgust, "but also by members of this government, even at the highest levels."

What went unsaid was the fact that the Minister himself was the main driving force behind the things which had been said about Harry, but no one misunderstood the insinuation. Though Fudge's face darkened in response, he could hardly refute the charge, fact that it was.

"So what would you propose, ambassador?" he snarled. "Mr. Potter has been exonerated in an open session of this Wizengamot. Does he wish for the post of Minister to add to his portfolio? I doubt even that would be enough of a boost to his ego."

"Cornelius, this is exactly the attitude the ambassador is speaking of," Dumbledore interjected sternly.

"I must insist you cease these constant attacks on my ward—I will not have the British public told sensational stories and outright lies about him."

Fudge's eyes narrowed even further, and he glared at J.S.

"Do I have your agreement, Minister?"

"You do," Madam Longbottom interjected, fixing the recalcitrant Minister with a baleful glare. "Regardless of personal opinions or pending hearings, this government has a duty to protect all magicals, and the slandering of any citizen is not to be tolerated."

"I concur," Dumbledore confirmed. "There will be no further opinions regarding Mr. Potter, or any other citizen, issued by any member of this government. I give you my word that any such activity will be dealt with."

Watching the Minister closely, Harry noticed the man himself said nothing, merely grunting in response to the strong statements which had been directed at him. Harry strongly suspected the Minister, as the top politician in the government, had never been hauled out on the carpet or spoken to in such a manner before. It was equally obvious he was not appreciating the experience.

But J.S. was not done. "That is acceptable, Madam Longbottom, Dumbledore," he said with a nod toward the two men. "But it is the prior statements which now concern me. These must be rectified so Harry can continue with his life without further prejudice."

"And you wish to bring up the past again?" Fudge demanded. "Have we not given enough to Mr. Potter already?"

"No, you have not," J.S. enunciated clearly. "With all that has been said about him, especially in the past few weeks, it is clear that the wizarding public of this country has had a slanderous image of Mr. Potter painted for them. This must be addressed—otherwise the mistaken perceptions of his character will persist. I insist on a public apology, to be published in the Daily Prophet in tomorrow's edition."

His lip curling once again in disgust, the Minister's eyes darted from Harry to J.S. to Dumbledore and back to Harry again, clearly looking for some way out of his predicament. Unfortunately, no opportunity presented itself, and the reality of the situation was that he could not refuse without losing face even further than he already had.

With a curt nod, he spoke, although it was clear the words were like ashes on his tongue. "An apology will be printed in the Prophet tomorrow. In return, Mr. Potter must cease making public claims of the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Harry has offered the use of Veritaserum, Minister," Dumbledore cut in. "Will you not take him up on his offer?"

"No!" Fudge stated vehemently. "I will not have the public panic and hysteria caused by such a story, as it is merely Mr. Potter's word and has not been confirmed. The use of Veritaserum does not rule out the possibility of hallucination or illusion: only that Mr. Potter believes what he says to be true."

He directed an insincere smile in Harry's direction, causing Harry to scowl in return. "After all, Mr. Potter had been through a challenging task moments before his experience—there is nothing to say that what he thought he saw was not influenced by his fatigue or some overt trickery on the part of supporters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, people intent on causing panic and destabilization. The events of the Quidditch World Cup have proved such people are still out there or that some other group wishes to make use of the fear they commanded during the war for their own purposes."

"The Ministry will investigate Mr. Potter's claims and respond accordingly," Fudge concluded. "There is no need to incite a public panic at this time."

Harry was unconvinced that Fudge would follow through with his pledge to investigate the matter—he struck Harry as the type of man who would ignore the unpleasant truth, hoping it would go away in time. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Dumbledore and J.S. exchange a glance before their attention was returned to the Minister.

"That would be acceptable, Minister," Dumbledore confirmed. "As the head of the Wizengamot, please keep me apprised of the progress of your investigation. If, as Harry has stated, Voldemort has returned, we will need to act quickly to prepare for a conflict with his forces."

"Of course, Headmaster," the Minister said with another artificial smile. "You will be the first to know."

Privately, J.S. held no doubt the Minister would attempt to sweep it all under the carpet and do nothing about Voldemort's return—he had been unwilling to even entertain the notion in the first place, and his sudden about-face was suspicious in the extreme. However, knowing only the Minister had the authority to launch a full investigation, J.S. realized his own hands were tied at present. He was a foreigner, after all, and he could only do so much.

Still, there was one more matter which required attention, one which would provide Fudge another black eye. Or at least he hoped it would.

"Minister, if I could have the indulgence of the Wizengamot, there is one other matter which needs to be discussed today."

Fudge sighed and gazed down with exaggerated patience. "I think we have discussed the matter of Mr. Potter in great depth, ambassador. There is no need for further discourse. I assure you that everything which has been decided here today will be put into action at the earliest opportunity."

"Minister, what I have to say has nothing to do with Mr. Potter. It does, however, have a great deal of significance for everyone here today."

"I believe we need to let the ambassador speak, Minister," Dumbledore said. "The ambassador has discussed this with me previously, and this matter must inevitably come before the Wizengamot. It is better to discuss it now while we are all here."

Although silent for several moments, peering at J.S. suspiciously, Fudge finally acquiesced. "If you must, then make it quick—do not waste the time of the Wizengamot."

Grinning with a feral intensity, J.S. gave a slight, mocking bow. "Several months ago, I was contacted by Mr. Potter's guardian and made aware of his situation and the document which was used to ultimately conclude the engagement I have just spoken of. I was, I admit, absolutely astonished to be contacted by this person, but after taking the time to hear his story and verify it for myself, I understood his plight and agreed to assist him in any way possible to resolve his situation."



Augusta Longbottom was clearly becoming impatient. "Ambassador, will you please come to the point? You have mentioned Mr. Potter's guardian several times, but you have not mentioned his name. Who are you speaking of?"

"Mr. Potter's guardian is none other than Sirius Black."

The pandemonium which greeted J.S.' statement was immediate and louder than his previous declarations had caused. J.S. stood there and smirked as witches and wizards yelled in disbelief, letting loose their outrage that he, a foreigner, had dared meet with one of their most hated and reviled criminals. They would soon find out just who the enemy was, J.S. thought grimly.

With the assistance of Fudge's gavel, not to mention a concussion blast or two from the end of Dumbledore's wand, order was restored to the courtroom, although tempers were still high and threatened to flare at any moment.

Fudge gazed down at J.S. with an unpleasant sneer—J.S. was certain Fudge thought he had finally found something with which to attack his enemy. How little the Minister understood.

"How dare you cooperate with that murderer! Have you no decency at all? This man is a convicted killer, a mass murderer who was known to be after your charge when he escaped from Azkaban two years ago. Given your association with him, I wonder at the purpose of this alliance. Do you have some reason in conspiring with Black to gain control over the boy? And how can he even be considered to be Mr. Potter's guardian when he's a murderer?"

"Minister," J.S. began, choosing his words very carefully to ensure he was understood, "Sirius Black is an escapee from Azkaban, but you and I both know he is not a convicted killer!"

"Of course he is," Fudge stammered. "He spent a dozen years in Azkaban for betraying Mr. Potter's parents to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and blowing up a street, killing Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles."

"I am well aware of the time Mr. Black spent in Azkaban, Minister, but you don't have to act innocent. We both know he was put there without a trial."

"And as for his being Harry's guardian," Dumbledore interjected, "it all has to do with the magic involved. Godparents are magically assigned—and as Sirius was never tried and convicted, the magic still recognizes him not only as Harry's godfather but also as his legal guardian. Nothing can change this until he is actually convicted of some wrongdoing—then the guardianship and position of godfather would pass to whomever the Potters designated next in their wills."

Glancing around the room, the prevailing mood was one of shock—contrary to what J.S. had suspected, it appeared that most, if not all of the British Wizengamot was not in on whatever conspiracy had landed Sirius in Azkaban without due process. Either that or they were all exceptional actors. It would be a black eye on the collective Wizengamot, depending how it turned out Sirius had been denied a trial, something of which J.S. was as of yet uncertain. He had had trouble digging up any information at all on the incarceration of Sirius Black, even with Dumbledore's help.

"This is ridiculous!" the pink-clad woman spoke up, obviously offended by the statements being made. "Everyone knows that Black was found guilty and sentenced to life in Azkaban. Do you think we do not know the status of our own criminals?"

"That's precisely what I am saying, Madam Umbridge," came the reply. "Mr. Black stated to me, under the influence of Veritaserum, that upon being stunned by Aurors after confronting Peter Pettigrew, he awoke to find himself in Azkaban and was never taken to trial. Since the questioning of the perpetrator of such a serious crime under Veritaserum is standard procedure, I can only speculate that the trial never took place, unless some jumped-up mock trial was convened in which Mr. Black was not even allowed to defend himself. In either case, we seem to have a serious miscarriage of justice on our hands."

"Chief Warlock, can you illuminate us on the history of Mr. Black and the ministry?"

"Unfortunately not," Dumbledore replied with aplomb. "I became Chief Warlock more than a year after the war ended and was not involved in the decision. We were told that Minister Bagnold had convened a special tribunal of Wizengamot leaders and had found Sirius guilty and incarcerated him in Azkaban."

Dumbledore began pacing the room, his arms clasped behind his back, a look of intense concentration engraved upon his face. "Although a tribunal is an unusual procedure, it is within the right of the Minister and Chief Warlock to agree to try a criminal in such a manner, especially if the trial is expected to be divisive, or if there is a risk of sensitive information being released to the public—the tribunal is thought to act on behalf of the Wizengamot in instances such as this. In Sirius' specific case, the Minister was concerned about the effect of a sensational trial of the betrayal of the Potters, who continue to be a very popular family, and with Harry's own burgeoning popularity due to the defeat of Voldemort, it was deemed necessary to conduct the trial as quickly and unobtrusively as possible."

"And you never thought to question this?" J.S. demanded, infuriated that his new friend had spent over a decade in the worst hell on earth without even the legal semblance of a trial. "Where are the checks on abuse of this procedure?"

"The Wizengamot itself," Dumbledore responded. "You must understand that this is a course of action which is rarely invoked. If any member of the Wizengamot feels the decision rendered by the tribunal is incorrect, they can bring a motion to the body to have the case retried before the entire Wizengamot. In fact, any citizen may bring forward the same motion via a petition to the Wizengamot. The Wizengamot would then vote on whether to hear the case and whether to hear it in closed or open session."

"Headmaster," Fudge interrupted, his voice strained, "I hardly think we should be speaking of this in full Wizengamot session. We should adjourn the court and take this up in private. I guarantee the Ministry will support any recommendation with respect to the status of Sirius Black and his escape from Azkaban."

"On the contrary," Madam Longbottom spoke up, "I believe this is exactly what we need. Far too often, the doings of this body have

been mired in secrecy, which has led to this situation, among others. Please continue, Dumbledore."

Dumbledore bowed his head and continued. "With respect to Sirius, at the end of the First Wizarding War, our world was weary from years of guerilla warfare with Voldemort and heartsick over the deaths of the Potters, who many had considered heroes. The outpouring of sympathy for Harry's plight was such that the explanation was accepted and not questioned. No one would put forward a motion to grant the man a trial when the evidence against him seemed airtight.

"Since Sirius' escape, I have searched for transcripts of the trial, affidavits signed by those involved, anything which would give an indication that the hearing actually took place. Regardless of the secrecy of the tribunal, records should still have been kept, records which would be sealed to the Minister, the Chief Warlock, and a few others in high and trustworthy positions. These records would provide information for future reference or in the case it was proved there was a miscarriage of justice."

Dumbledore stopped and gazed around the room, fixing each member with his expressionless stare in turn. "No such records exist. As Chief Warlock, I have the authority to access any records pertaining to any Wizengamot actions, regardless of how they were conducted. As no sign of them can be found, I conclude that the trial never took place."

"This is all very interesting, but do you have a point in bringing this up?" Umbridge asked. "We all know Sirius Black was guilty of the crimes of which he was accused, and regardless of his trial or lack thereof, you have still communicated with a murderer on the run from the Ministry."

J.S. smirked at the unpleasant woman. The expression on Fudge's face told him that the Minister knew exactly why they were now referring to Sirius Black, but his pink lackey clearly had no idea of what Harry's claims regarding Pettigrew were. Wizarding Britain was about to receive a very nasty shock.

"Harry, would you like to do the honors?"

His new ward appeared somewhat surprised at being spoken to, but he screwed up his courage admirably and spoke in a clear voice. "Sirius didn't betray my parents, it was Peter Pettigrew."

"Peter Pettigrew!" the woman shrieked. "He was murdered by Black along with those Muggles—his finger was the only part of his body the Aurors could find! Headmaster Dumbledore has confirmed that Black was your parents' secret keeper—why do you persist in defending your parents' murderer?"

"Because Sirius Black was not their secret keeper when they were betrayed," Harry responded. "Sirius convinced my parents to switch to Peter Pettigrew, feeling Peter was the least obvious choice. They hoped to throw Voldemort off the trail."

"And how do you know this?" a voice rang out from the upper sections of the chamber.

Harry glanced apprehensively at Dumbledore—the headmaster gave a shrug, which was accompanied by J.S.' smile of encouragement.

"I met him in my third year," Harry stated, causing the Wizengamot to fall silent in amazement. "He unmasked Pettigrew as the Weasleys' pet rat, Scabbers, and he and I were almost kissed by Dementors put there to protect the school by the Ministry."

Fudge had the grace to appear somewhat embarrassed at Harry's testimony—the decision to place Dementors at Hogwarts and the trouble they had caused there, particularly for Harry, had been lambasted in the press for months after they had been ordered back to Azkaban.

"And what happened to Pettigrew?" another voice asked.

"He escaped that night before we could get him back to the castle," Harry responded, not wanting to get into the exact details of the events from that evening. "The next time I saw him was when he performed the ritual to return Voldemort at the end of June."

"Chief Warlock, did you know of the switch in secret keepers?" J.S. asked. "I seem to remember you were heavily involved with

prosecuting the war against Voldemort and that you had a hand in the Potters' defense."

"Unfortunately, I didn't know at the time," Dumbledore responded somewhat sadly. "James, Peter, and Sirius enacted the switch with the utmost in secrecy, telling no one else of what they had done. I learned nothing about it until after Sirius escaped from Azkaban."

"And if I had known," he continued after a moment's thought, "I would have counseled against it. I had known all four boys since their entrance into Hogwarts, and knew that Pettigrew was not quite made of the same stuff as the other three. Although I had no idea he was a traitor, I knew that should he be captured, Voldemort would learn of the Potters' location immediately—Peter was not the type to resist the dark lord's torture to protect his friends. I feared he would give up any information, do anything to avoid continued mistreatment at the hands of the dark lord, regardless of whether Voldemort knew he was the secret keeper. At the time, we were aware of a leak in our ranks, but we suspected the wrong friend—Remus Lupin was our primary suspect in part due to his status as a werewolf and the known association of a number of werewolf packs with the forces of the dark lord. I deeply regret our lack of vision in this matter."

With Dumbledore's statement, all noise in the Wizengamot chamber ceased, giving over to contemplation of what had been revealed. It appeared the British legislative body as a whole was not happy with the situation, but with the testimony they had just heard, they could not deny the need for a trial for Sirius.

With any luck, J.S. reflected grimly, heads will roll over this—especially Fudge's. The fool was told of this over a year ago and denied all possibility of Sirius' innocence, doing nothing to ensure justice was done.

Glancing over at Harry, J.S. saw a mixture of hope and longing in the young man's face. Knowing what he did of Harry's background with his relatives, J.S. reached out and squeezed the young man's shoulder, reassuring him that all which could be done for his godfather would be done. It was time to drive the point home and leave this place—his time dealing with British politics and their Wizengamot had left a sour taste in J.S.' mouth.

"Minister, you have the testimony of my charge that Sirius Black is alive and means no harm to him and that Peter Pettigrew is not only still alive, but also the real betrayer of James and Lily Potter and the murderer of those twelve Muggles. Harry, will you agree to be put under the influence of Veritaserum to confirm your statements?"

"Absolutely," came the resolute reply.

His eyes were still pinched with displeasure as he glared down at Harry, but for the moment, the British Minister made no response.

"Until such time as Mr. Black receives a proper trial for his actions, the French Ministry has made an offer of asylum to him. He will be treated for his time spent in Azkaban and has agreed to return to Britain to stand trial."

Ten minutes previous, such a statement would have set off a firestorm of indignation from the assembled members of the Wizengamot; however, the revelations about the true situation rendered the chamber silent—no one would risk their reputations, or the reputation of the body as a whole, by raising an objection to such a reasonable and lawful suggestion.

"In addition, although I will take up Mr. Potter's guardianship for now, once Mr. Black has been exonerated—and we are certain he will be—he will once again take over his rightful duty. Please keep myself and the French Ministry informed of the time of his trial so we can return him to Britain."

"Ambassador," Dumbledore interjected from J.S.' side, "I give you my word as Chief Warlock that Mr. Black will be given a trial."

When J.S. bowed in response, Dumbledore continued. "Given what I suspect is the state of his health after his long incarceration and his time on the run, perhaps it would be better to delay the hearing until he is feeling somewhat recovered from his ordeal. Perhaps sometime in September would be prudent?"

"I will speak to our healers and have them provide an update of his condition."

"Thank you, ambassador." Dumbledore turned his gaze on the Minister. "Minister, since Sirius is now the guest of the French

Ministry, it would be prudent to alert the Muggle authorities that he is now longer sought after. Please liaise with your counterpart in the Muggle government."

Although he appeared like he was trying to swallow a whole grapefruit, Fudge nodded his head curtly.

Dumbledore then gazed around the silent Wizengamot chamber. "I would also like to step from my role as Chief Warlock and state as Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards that the ICW supports the actions of the French Ministry and the ambassador in the matter of Sirius Black's asylum in France and the marriage contract enacted between Harry Potter and Fleur Delacour. As the ambassador mentioned earlier, the ICW has voted overwhelmingly for support in these matters."

He paused to let the import of his statements sink in. "Now, if there are no further matters to discuss, perhaps we should adjourn these proceedings."

Appearing to wish nothing more than to remove himself from the site of his embarrassing defeat, Fudge acquiesced most ungraciously with a muttered agreement, coupled with a sharp rap from his gavel. In moments, he had gathered his belongings and stalked from the room, his faithful pink puppy hard on his heels.

As the assembled members began to file from the room, J.S. turned to Harry and Dumbledore, shaking both of their hands firmly. The expression of surprise and embarrassment on young Harry's face was amusing, while slightly concerning to J.S. Harry, it appeared, badly needed a measure of confidence and care, something he was not receiving from his relatives. J.S.' family, although the marriage contract had been a shock, had fully committed to providing that to the young man, an effort which Sirius would certainly join enthusiastically.

Sensing the young man had some questions for him, J.S. turned to Dumbledore and thanked him for his support. "If I could have a few moments' indulgence, I believe Harry has some questions for me. I still need to speak with the Minister for on one other piece of business—will you ensure he does not run off with his tail between his legs before I can meet him?"



Dumbledore laughed quietly in response. "I do not doubt the Minister will be unexcited by such a request, but I will see to it that we have a short time with him. Shall we say in half an hour from now?"

J.S. nodded his head and motioned for Harry to follow him from the courtroom.

A bewildered Harry Potter followed his benefactor from the courtroom, dazed at the events of the previous half hour. It would take some time for him to assimilate the information and changes to his life.

Still, it seemed to be for the better—at the very least, it appeared he would not have to return to the Dursleys', even if he was about to be forced into a marriage with someone he hardly knew.

And he had gained a significant ally. If he was any judge at all, J.S. appeared to be a strong, no-nonsense leader who would not only fight for the rights of Harry's godfather, but also present a warm, comfortable home for him until Sirius was physically fit again. Knowing what he did of other families, Harry knew he had suffered from the lack of some manner of support from a family unit—he knew he had missed it desperately. Perhaps this would be the start of a new chapter in his life, one which was not all darkness and despair. He could only hope.

They walked through the hallways of the Ministry, avoiding the small groups of Wizengamot elders who had stopped here and there to confer with one another and the other Ministry employees who dotted the hallways, going about whatever business the Ministry was doing that day.

As they approached the stairway leading up to the upper levels, Harry's line of sight was caught by the woman in garish pink. She was watching him, the same sickeningly sweet expression plastered on her face, while in contrast, her cold eyes seemed to impale him from a distance. He returned her gaze unflinchingly, causing her smile to slip into a frown of displeasure, before following J.S. up the stairs and reflecting he had made another enemy this day. Of course, given the way she had conducted herself in the courtroom, he suspected she had turned up already opposed to him for some unfathomable reason.

"We'll take the stairway down to level one," J.S. commented. "No sense exposing you to the masses in the Atrium so soon after the hearing."

Harry agreed immediately, grateful the man understood his aversion to crowds, especially in light of his unwanted fame.

On the first floor of the Ministry building, J.S. commandeered a small conference room, and after ensuring the door was closed for complete privacy, he turned and took a seat, motioning for Harry to do the same.

"Well, Harry," J.S. began, slight amusement coloring his voice, "It's a lot to take in over the course of less than an hour, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied automatically.

Smiling, J.S. waved Harry's words off. "Harry, I've just become your temporary guardian, and I will be your father-in-law at some point—I do not stand on ceremony. There is no need to call me sir. J.S. will suffice."

Appreciating the fact that the man wished to have more of an equal relationship with him than just guardian and ward, Harry relaxed slightly, allowing a small smile to come over his face.

"Thank you, J.S. It is a lot to take in."

"Do not worry—I am certain you will have lots of time to think about the changes. Sirius is staying in my chateau in France while he undergoes treatment for his time in Azkaban. You will see him when we go there today."

"I've never been to France," Harry responded nervously. "Do you mean for us to stay there until school starts again?"

"Actually, we will be moving to England in the very near future, but that's something I still need to discuss with your Minister. You will only be in France for a few days at most."

Harry nodded, digesting the fact that he would see Sirius—he had been concerned and surprised when he had not seen his godfather

at Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore had assured him that all was well, but he had refused to tell him any more, saying that it was not his place and that no one else had had any information on Sirius' whereabouts. He was reassured to know his godfather was now being cared for by real healers.

"I'm sorry, s... J.S..." Harry stammered, noting the grin at his near slip-up. Harry found himself smiling in response, appreciating the fact that his new guardian was this so personable and easy to deal with.

Trying again, Harry took a deep breath. "I just wanted to say... I'm sorry for my reaction in the courtroom to your announcement. It's all just..."

J.S. reached over and grasped Harry's shoulder. "As I said before, Harry, I am not upset. I knew this would be a lot for you to take in—it's not every day you find out you are engaged to someone you barely know."

"No, it isn't," Harry responded in a quiet voice, thinking of his friends and how they would react. The thoughts he had had of Hermione and Ron this morning did not seem to matter any longer, considering the new reality of his situation. "I can't imagine Fleur is very happy about it either."

"She was not when I first told her of what would happen," J.S. responded with amusement. "You have to understand, Harry, although arranged marriages are not common any longer, they are still done often enough that every child raised in the magical world is aware of the possibility their spouse may be chosen for them by their parents. Fleur was surprised and not very happy about the development—she is not the type to take anything done without her consent with any degree of contentment—but we discussed it, and I believe she has become at the very least resigned to the situation. It may not have been what she would have chosen, but it is better than a lot of young women in her position can expect."

At Harry's questioning glance, J.S. shook his head. "That's something you will have to ask Fleur—it has to do with being a Veela. She can explain it much better than I can."

Harry's curiosity was peaked, but he refrained from questioning his guardian any further on the subject, knowing his questions would not be answered.

"Fleur is at least acquainted with you and respects you, so you are both starting out better than many who end up in arranged marriages. I do not know what will happen in the future, but I believe you will do well together."

Dubiously regarding his companion, Harry responded, "Fleur respects me?"

J.S. let out a loud laugh and shook his head. "So, I see you have been subjected to the infamous Fleur mask of arrogance."

At Harry's expression of incomprehension, J.S. let out a few more chuckles and—wiping his eyes—gathered himself to face his ward. "Again, perhaps this is not my story to tell, but Fleur's arrogance is somewhat of a... show, if you will."

J.S. eyed Harry before continuing. "You will have to go to her for details, but you should understand it is not easy to be a Veela when you are surrounded by others who are jealous of your abilities. Surely you have felt some measure of this yourself."

It was only the truth, Harry reflected, and he was suddenly glad of the fact he had decided to reserve judgment. He had never thought of the difficulty she would have to face every day, the jealousy and distrust others must feel toward a girl who by all accounts could turn any head, could steal any boyfriend, merely by turning on her Veela allure, without even resorting to her incredible physical beauty. He did not know Fleur beyond a simple, basic acquaintance, but he thought he knew enough to deduce she was not the type to behave in such a fashion, regardless of what others may think of her. Either way, she certainly had not done so when he had been able to witness it.

"I understand," he responded quietly.

"Good," J.S. approved. "I trust you and Fleur will take the time to get to know one another."

"Yes, sir," Harry responded without thinking, prompting another fond smile from J.S.

"Now, Harry, in answer to your question, yes, Fleur does respect you. Your courage during the tournament, the way you held yourself under the most trying of circumstances, the manner in which you beat the odds to win—they all definitely made an impression on my daughter."

Harry's cheeks were burning at the praise, especially since it was coming from a man who was speaking as though he had heard these praises from his beautiful daughter. The rush of color did not go unnoticed either, as he immediately saw his new benefactor grinning in response to Harry's embarrassment.

"But more especially, Harry, I believe she respects you and is grateful to you for your actions during the second task. You may not be aware of this, but Veela are beings of fire. Fleur's powers are at their lowest within the element of water, which is why she found it difficult, if not impossible, to defeat the grindylows which attacked her as she searched for her sister."

J.S.' eyes became misty as he recollected what must have been a painful experience for him and his family. "I was so worried for her—and for Gabrielle when I learned she was under the water as well—and did not sleep well for weeks in advance of the second task once Fleur told me what it entailed. Although every precaution was taken to ensure the safety of all the participants, you are well aware of the dangers inherent in the tasks, regardless of precautions."

A smile broke over J.S.' face. "Nice bit of flying during the first task, by the way. I don't think I've ever seen the like in all my years."

Harry felt his face become hot yet again, but this time J.S. was not paying attention, lost as he was in the recollection of the previous school year.

"Knowing the nature of the tasks and the skill and courage needed to face them, place yourself in Fleur's shoes, and think of how it was for her, going into a task which was already intrinsically dangerous, but also being held in an element which is the antithesis of the majority of your powers. Fleur was at a serious disadvantage in that

task, even greater than your own disadvantage throughout the entire tournament due to your being younger than the other champions.

"Then, consider the fact that Fleur loves her sister very much, and when she discovered her missing on the morning of the task, she was frantic, knowing her handicap in the task, and seriously questioned her ability to save her sister. And then the grindylows attacked and her worst fears were realized. You heard how the clue was worded—she emerged from the lake shivering and injured, but even more so, she was heartsick at her failure, deeply afraid of what may come of her sister.

"Then, against all hope, her sister emerges from the lake, and the means of her rescue is a boy who, in her own words, she had 'treated as though he were the lowest form of dirt to be scraped from the bottom of her shoes'. She was ashamed for her actions and words—had been ashamed of them for months—but her relief and joy were so great in the rescue of her sister that she expressed herself as gratefully as she was able. Believe me, Harry, she more than respects you. Any more than that, I think you'll have to hear from her yourself."

Harry was struggling with the praise—he did not think he had done anything especially noteworthy or heroic. He had been in a position to help someone, or so he thought, and he had taken that opportunity. Who would not? And it had all been so pointless—if he had thought about it at the time, he would have realized Dumbledore would never have allowed someone to be lost forever just because one of the champions had failed to retrieve their hostage.

"But J.S., it was all so pointless. The hostages were never in any danger at all—the Headmaster told me after the task."

J.S. merely shook his head. "Don't try to deflect praise, Harry—it is very unbecoming. Did you believe at the time that my daughter would be lost if she were not rescued?"

At Harry's brief nod, he continued. "Then does the deed have any less meaning knowing in hindsight that it was ultimately unnecessary? Perhaps if you had thought about it further, you would have realized the hostages were safe regardless of your actions, but that does nothing to erase the fact that you acted heroically to save

another person's life based on the information you possessed at the time."

"Hermione calls it my saving people thing," Harry responded with some embarrassment.

J.S. threw his head back and roared with laughter, wiping the tears from his eyes as he shook his head in mirth. Harry had to acknowledge his laughter with a grin of his own—he had to admit it was amusing to have his impulse to help others described in such a manner.

"I guess it is at that," J.S. finally responded, shaking his head between bouts of laughter. "But that's why I felt I had a debt to you, Harry. I'm not certain how much you understand about these things, but debts are taken very seriously in the magical world. They are generally magical in nature and can comprise of anything from monetary debts to life debts—technically, you saved my daughter's life, which binds you to my family by magic. If you were to invoke this debt, it would make the bond even stronger, allowing you access to many other demands you could make to my family... and to Gabrielle in particular.

"And then there is the matter of what you did for Fleur during the third task. I presume it was you who rescued her when she was unconscious in the maze?"

Slightly scared as to where this was leading, Harry nodded his head. "She was being held by some vines. I freed her, then shot sparks out of my wand so she would be rescued."

Looking thoughtful, J.S. templed his fingers for a moment before continuing. "In that case as well, it is uncertain what would have ultimately happened to Fleur. Whether a declared life debt would ever take hold if you were to invoke either incident I cannot say, but I still cannot ignore the matter."

Struggling somewhat with the concept, Harry tentatively regarded J.S. "What kind of demands would I be able to ask for?"

J.S. shrugged. "There are many, depending on the degree of the debt and the relationship between the parties. Essentially, though, if you called in your debt to either of my girls, they would not be able

to harm you, ever, and they may even be forced to take other actions, such as defending you against your enemies and the like."

Seeing Harry's look of relief, J.S. chuckled and slapped him on the back. "Do not worry, Harry, they could not be forced to do anything immoral or illegal—magic does not work that way. You could not make them do anything they feel is wrong or degrading, you would just be able to control their intentions and actions against yourself and anyone with whom you associate."

"Was this why you helped me?"

"In part," J.S. responded. "Yes, I feel a debt exists between us, and my openly supporting you, assisting in the trial, and betrothing you to Fleur is a measure of repaying that debt."

"But another part of my reasoning is out of concern for my daughter."

He regarded Harry, who squirmed somewhat uncomfortably, before continuing. "I have told you very briefly of some of the challenges Fleur faces and some of my worries for her future. I am secure enough in your character and in your personality that by betrothing her to you I know she will be well taken care of and will be loved and valued for herself. Now I do not need to worry about the possibility she will never find someone or, worse yet, that she will eventually fall in love with someone who cares nothing for her but wants her for a plaything or a trophy to show his friends. It was not long ago that such a fate was all too common for Veela. Now that Fleur is taken care of, I only need to worry about Gabrielle, and she is many years from that, as she is still only nine years old."

"And of course, the situation with this Lord Voldemort of yours played into my decision. You will be in direct conflict with this dark lord, and he seems to have taken an unhealthy interest in you. But I understand what this government of yours seems not to—eventually, if he is able to take over England, it will be too small for him, and he will start looking beyond its borders. By supporting you, who I believe will be instrumental in the effort against him, I am helping to defend my own homeland as well as yours."



"Thank you, sir," Harry responded, filled with emotion. J.S. spoke to him as an adult and treated him as if he was a person of worth—rarely had he experienced that from adults of his acquaintance.

"You are welcome, Harry," J.S. replied with a warm smile. "I can see already that we will become great friends. Now, did you have anything else you wanted to ask me?"

Harry thought about it momentarily before venturing another question. "How did this marriage contract come about?"

"It was your grandfather and my father, Harry," J.S. answered after a moment's thought. "Fifty years ago, your grandfather was the English Ambassador to France. My father, Jean-Francois Delacour, was a member of the upper echelons of the French government. They met and became friends with one another and ultimately created the marriage contract to bind their families together. The contract was worded in such a way that it was to bind a firstborn Potter and a firstborn Delacour. But as I am the eldest sibling in my family and your father was your grandfather's only child, the contract went unfulfilled.

"This is why I am able to betroth my daughter to you—you are both firstborn in your respective families, meeting the conditions of the contract."

"But what would have happened if we were not betrothed?" Harry asked worriedly. "I've heard that breach of contract can have some disastrous results in the magic world."

"That is correct," J.S. said with a wry smile, "but in this case you do not need to worry. Until the contract is accepted by both parties—or in the case of a marriage contract, the guardians of both parties—it is not binding. I did not even know my father had done this—it was Sirius who was searching through some old papers of James', who found it and alerted me to its existence."

"But isn't Fleur of age? Wouldn't she have to agree to the marriage contract herself?"

"Fleur is of age," J.S. confirmed. "But in the magical world, children are still bound to their parents in a number of ways, the most of important of which in this case, is in relation to my status as the

head of the Delacour family. Regardless of her age, I can still negotiate a marriage contract on her behalf, if I believe it is in the best interest of the family.

"Now, of course I would take her wishes into account, and if she had a serious boyfriend or fiancé, or had reservations about this marriage, I would likely have tried to find another way to help you. I could have forced her into it, though, as long as she was not already married—there are a few things I cannot override, and an already existing marriage is one of them.

"Of course, many parents might not take these things into account. I love my daughters and want them to be happy, but to many, especially in traditional Pureblood society, children are often merely pawns used to set up alliances between houses—their wishes are not taken into account. I like to think that I am somewhat more civilized than that."

It made a certain amount of sense, Harry reflected, and fit in with a lot of what he knew about family groups in the magical world. It was also comforting that although J.S. could have forced his daughter into this, he did not, and would not have. As he had said before, she was at least resigned to it—maybe in time they could actually grow into an appreciation or even love for each other.

"Did you know my father?" Harry asked hesitantly, hoping he had one more link to his dead parents.

"I did indeed. I lived in England for a time when I was a child—it is the reason I speak English without much of an accent. As my father was close to your grandfather, we were regular playmates, and even though I was a few years older than your father, we were great friends as well. Unfortunately, when we returned to France before I started my schooling, my father died tragically a short time later, and we lost contact with your family."

Harry nodded, slightly choked with emotion. He had someone else who knew his father as a young boy, which meant another connection. It was not much, but it meant the world to him.

"Well, young Harry, I think our half hour is almost up," J.S. said, rising to his feet. "You undoubtedly have more questions, but I believe we will have time to answer them in the coming weeks."

Agreeing, Harry followed his new guardian from the room, reflecting that his life was undergoing massive changes. It was not what he had expected, but his time alone with J.S. had reassured him all would be well.

## Chapter 3 - Meetings

While a Wizengamot session would not normally be broadcast out to the general public, in this instance Fudge, seemingly confident of his case and wanting to make certain the entire population witnessed the downfall of the great Harry Potter, had ordered the proceedings open to all. Now, with his arguments in ruins and the young man exonerated, his hasty and overconfident decision appeared to have backfired, almost ensuring his popularity, which was always an iffy thing at best, would take a huge hit. How much of a hit—and whether it would ultimately cost him his job—remained to be seen.

While most of the country paid at least some attention to the proceedings (Harry Potter was, after all, big news in the British wizarding world), nowhere was the broadcast so intently dissected as in the house at Grimmauld Place. The affection and friendship for the young man felt by most in that house, ensured the general anxiety level would be high, regardless of the outwardly confident statements of the various occupants that Dumbledore would never allow Harry to be expelled. And while they had all voiced the same platitudes at some point in time, each had his or her own doubts of the eventual outcome of the trial and the fate of the young man who had become important to each and every one of them. Every phase of the trial was carefully listened to and agonized over, and while there were enough twists and turns in the proceedings to do a murder novel proud, when the verdict was known and the charges were dropped by the Minister, a general feeling of relief over Harry's exoneration was felt through out the house.

But beyond the relief and the satisfaction for the way J.S. had insisted on the public apology, the reaction to the news of Harry's betrothal to the beautiful French witch was about as varied as there were people in the room.

Remus, ever the Marauder and aware of the great prank which had just been perpetrated on the Minister, was silently cheering his friend on, thankful that Sirius had done something to assist his godson rather than mope around Grimmauld. He was also happy Sirius would finally receive the treatment he needed and the exoneration he deserved—Remus, to be truthful, still harbored feelings of guilt for believing Sirius capable of the betrayal for which he had spent so many years of his life locked away.

Tonks, who had met Harry barely a week before and already considered him to be an honorary little brother, was contemplating the great opportunity to tease her shy friend about his engagement to the beautiful French girl. But beyond that, she was contemplating how she could help the young man further in his development and struggle against the dark lord, who seemed to have targeted the young man. She was an Auror—and though quite new to her position, but she still felt she could be of some use to the young man by teaching him what she knew. The ability to fight would only help him in the coming struggle, and he was, after all, of an age and maturity where he could now be taught some of the more complicated spells which would eventually serve him.

Fred and George were merely happy for their friend, sharing a knowing glance—as only twins as close as they were could—that such an unusual happening was undoubtedly normal for Harry's decidedly odd world.

And Bill Weasley, though he really did not know Harry well at all, was happy the likeable young man had received the justice he was due. Beyond that, he was nevertheless arrested by an indefinable sense of loss—he had seen the young French witch at the tournament the previous June and been instantly smitten by her. And now she was out of reach.

Ginny was the most vocal in her response—although this was perhaps not surprising those around her—as she gasped loudly and then started wailing, throwing her arms around her mother and sobbing bitterly about the unfairness of the world.

While she was comforting her daughter, Molly Weasley, although not as noticeably upset with the development, was at least as angry—she had always held out hope that Harry would take a fancy to her youngest child and join their family through marriage. That she had encouraged her young daughter from the earliest time of Ginny's memory—and thereby in part helped cause the infatuation which now led to her daughter's distress—was something she did not even consider. Molly had known Harry's parents when they were young, and after she had finally produced a daughter a little more than a year after Harry's birth, she had immediately gotten the idea that her little Ginevra would be the perfect mate for the young Potter heir. Those plans were, of course, now completely in ruins.

For Ron Weasley, the reaction was a little more complex than most, partially due to his close association with Harry and all that had passed between them, especially in the last year, and partially due to his feelings for a certain brown-haired witch.

Simply put, Ron had self esteem issues, although he had certainly never considered it in such a way himself. The youngest of six boys, he always felt as though he was struggling to keep up with the legacy of five successful and popular brothers, not to mention a younger sister who was the darling of the family due to her being the first daughter born to the Weasley line in several generations. Add to that the fact that he had made, quite by accident, a close friend in Harry Potter, the most famous person of his generation, and it was quite easy to see why Ron sometimes felt a little lost in the shuffle.

It was the issue of Harry's fame which had partially been behind their problems during the tournament. It was not like Ron truly believed Harry had cheated his way into the tournament or that he was seeking more fame. Or at least that is what he came to understand in hindsight, once the realization of the true reason Harry had been entered into the tournament had set in. After all, his close association with his friend dictated that Ron, more than anyone else except perhaps Hermione, knew how much Harry hated his fame. But when Harry's name came out of that goblet, to Ron it was yet another instance of Harry getting all the glory. It did not matter whether he wanted it. Ron craved a little more recognition for himself, certainly not the fame and adulation Harry routinely received, which he understood would be exasperating, but just enough so he could finally be known as Ron Weasley... rather than "best friend to the Boy-Who-Lived" or "the youngest Weasley boy".

Of course, now he bitterly regretted his hasty and unthinking declaration the previous Halloween night. In true Harry fashion, once Ron had made the first move, Harry had offered his forgiveness without a single bat of an eye—Harry had the biggest heart Ron had ever seen, especially when one considered his upbringing. In anyone else, the effect of his neglectful guardians would have produced quite the opposite kind of person, Ron was certain. But despite Harry's forgiveness and acceptance of Ron's apology, it had introduced a distance between the two, a distance which had never been there before... and which Ron was uncertain how to bridge.

But even more than the distance between Ron and his best friend, the fact that it had essentially pushed Hermione away from him as well was intolerable. Of course Hermione had supported and believed Harry—Ron should have known she would. Hermione had grown up as much of an outsider as Harry—there was no way she would have given up such a friendship without something catastrophic event to completely destroy it. And this did not even take into account the closeness she had always shared with Harry, a closeness which Ron suspected surpassed even that between Ron and Harry.

And while Harry was his best friend, he wanted Hermione to be more—so much more. Of course, his friendship with Hermione remained the same as ever; as always, they mixed equal parts hanging out and sticking up for one another with an equal part of fighting with one another.

However, Ron had been making an attempt to argue less with her while trying to appear more in tune with her personality—almost like he was wooing her without making any overt moves. It had been difficult—after all, the things in which she was most interested, books and studying, did not really mesh well with his love of Quidditch and chess. Still, she was turning into an attractive young woman, one which he would love to get to know on a more personal, intimate basis. If only it was not for Harry.

But then that was not fair either—Harry was the linchpin that kept them together, after all, and Ron was aware that Hermione would likely never have been more than just another annoying girl in his year without Harry.

But without Harry, there would also be no competition for her affections—of that he was certain.

Some people considered Ron slightly slow and thick when it came to those around him, and objectively, Ron knew he tended to be single-minded and to miss things that others would pick up on. But Ron was anything but stupid, and he was far above average in some areas. He had made an attempt to be more observant around his friends this summer, particularly watching for any hint of affection beyond that of mere friendship between his closest friends.

And what he had seen between them had not encouraged him at all—without seeming to be aware of it, they were close, far too close for Ron's comfort. Their eyes lingered on one another a little too long, they touched more than was necessary—nothing more as of yet than a comforting hand on the shoulder or the tips of their fingers on an arm to emphasize a point—and they truly seemed in sync with one another. It all would have appeared platonic and completely innocent to the disinterested observer, yet to the newly observant Ron, their actions had spoken loudly and uncomfortably for his ambitions.

The major problem, to Ron's point of view, was the fact that if it came down to a choice between him and Harry, Ron was almost certain what Hermione's choice would be—and it would not be in his favor. Consciously or unconsciously, Hermione would always put Harry first, and if Harry were to express any interest at all in Hermione, Ron knew her choice would be made without even thinking about it. There would be nothing he could do to alter her preference.

But then this morning's events had completely thrown everything for a loop, but amazingly enough, it had worked to Ron's advantage. Being betrothed to another, Harry could hardly be any competition to Ron's pursuit of Hermione any longer, a fact which had Ron elated. It seemed fate had intervened in his favor for once.

But then the other side of Ron, the jealous prat who had reared his ugly head the previous year in the tournament, was slightly put off that Harry had once again, through no effort of his own, seemed to fall into a good situation. He had become engaged in an instant to a young woman who was possibly the most beautiful Ron had ever laid eyes on. How in Merlin's name did Harry get so lucky?

Shaking his head, Ron turned his thoughts away from his musings and peered surreptitiously at the young woman he hoped would become much more in his life than a mere friend. Hermione sat quietly staring intently at something only she could see, appearing as conflicted as he felt. She seemed somewhat disappointed to Ron's point of view, no doubt unhappy Harry was now off the market.

Still, that again could work to Ron's advantage. Perhaps he could be there for her—provide a sympathetic ear to listen to her troubles.



That was it, Ron decided. He would forget about Harry's good fortune and concentrate on his own. He would win Hermione's heart!

The subject of Ron's musings was engulfed in thoughts of her own.

Harry was free. He would not be taken from her—he would return to Hogwarts with her this year, and everything would be unchanged from what it was before.

But Hermione knew it was not the truth—everything had changed. Certainly Harry would continue to be her best friend and confidante; they would continue to do everything together, she would still see him every day.

But it would all be different, too. The new Harry would be promised in marriage to another, and eventually he would owe his allegiance to someone else. She would stop being the most important female in his life.

Hermione knew she should be happy for Harry—happy he had managed to avoid the fate for which Fudge had been pressing, happy he would continue to be a factor in her life.

But a part of her—a small, indefinable part which she could not shake—felt nothing but sorrow over the news of his betrothal to the beautiful French witch. How could she possibly compete with someone like Fleur Delacour? Of course, there was no competition—he was now engaged; it was done—nothing she could do would change that fact. She would never be anything more to him than a best friend, and even that would slip away as they matured.

How could this have happened? How had she developed these feelings for her best friend without even realizing it? How had it managed to slip past her over-organized mind, one which was usually so adept at catching every little thing? What was she to do now?

Automatically, she glanced over at her other friend, Ron Weasley, who appeared to be lost in a world of his own. Hermione was not unaware of Ron's feelings for her. He was not the type to hide his emotions; they were usually plain for anyone to see, and Hermione

was nothing if not observant. Although she had not been aware of it, her attention had largely been on Harry since he had arrived at Grimmauld Place, and she knew that attention had in turn garnered the attention of her other best friend.

What Hermione did not know was whether she could return Ron's feelings.

Ron was a good friend and while he did occasionally descend into jealous fits and he argued with her incessantly, he was also fiercely protective of her. Hermione had always known there was an even chance she would end up with one of her two best friends, but until now, she had always assumed it would be Harry rather than Ron. She and Harry made a much better match than she and Ron. For one thing, they did not always argue, and while her tendency to boss and nag did annoy him as much as it did Ron (in her own defense, she was learning to curb that particular facet of her personality), she knew her drive and determination helped his sometimes lackadaisical manner, whereas his boundless courage and ability to have fun helped balance her own tendency toward overwork and occasional timidity. She seriously doubted she could have had the courage to punch Malfoy in the third year without Harry's influence.

What did she have in common with Ron? Nothing sprang to mind, but what she did remember were their frequent arguments and Ron's tendency to belittle her achievements and anything with which she found enjoyment.

Still, it was apparent that if she was to end up with one of her best friends, it would be Ron, as Harry was now unavailable. It was a difficult admission to make, but she knew for the good of them both she had no choice but to suppress the feelings she had always harbored for Harry.

But could she transfer those feelings to Ron?

Leaving Harry outside in the waiting room, J.S. entered the minister's office, finding the Headmaster and Minister waiting for him, one with a welcoming smile and the other with an exaggerated mask of patience engraved upon his face. J.S. barely held back from smirking at the man—his attitude was only to be expected from such

a cowardly excuse for a minister. Hopefully, this meeting would take him down another peg or two.

The office was large and lavishly furnished and decorated. The furniture was of the finest dragonhide, the walls were dotted with paintings, and every nook and cranny was filled with objects and artwork, stowed here and there with little apparent thought to organization or style. It was obviously the office of a man who loved his comforts, and it appeared to be calculated to remind the visitor that the office was occupied and that the occupant was here to stay for the foreseeable future. Taste was certainly not a consideration, if the sometimes gaudy and overdone ornaments were any indication, and there was no thought given to the arrangement or display, except to bludgeon the viewer over the head with the wealth of its owner.

The man needs the services of an expert in interior design, J.S. thought with some sardonic amusement. With any luck, he would not occupy the office much longer.

He appeared to have interrupted a conversation between them—one, unless J.S. missed his guess, which included a healthy dose of complaints from the Minister. The comments from the Headmaster's side had likely been vaguely placatory but entirely noncommittal. The subject of those complaints, of course, was obvious.

"Have a seat, ambassador," Dumbledore said, waving his hand at one of the chairs.

The Minister glared at the Headmaster, presumably unhappy over Dumbledore's liberality with his office, but he said little, merely echoing the sentiments in a barely civil tone.

Laughing lightly to himself, J.S. sat in the indicated chair and gazed at the Minister, wondering what the man's reaction would be to his little announcement. Nothing good, unless he missed his guess.

After a moment of silence, Fudge sighed in an embellished manner and fixed J.S. with a glare.

"I'm told by Dumbledore that you requested this meeting, ambassador," he ground out. "If you have something to say, please say it. I'm a busy man."

J.S. bowed his head, forcing the urge to laugh at the man's pomposity to remain unexpressed. "Indeed, I have, Minister. I have a few reasons for being here now. Foremost is to ensure the things we discussed in the Wizengamot chambers would be implemented without delay."

Fudge fixed him with an unfriendly eye. "Ambassador, I will not lie to you—I am extremely displeased with the outcome of the trial. Your ward has been a thorn in the side of this Ministry since he began attending Hogwarts, and I am not happy with the favoritism he has been receiving and the way we have bent over backward to accommodate a young boy whose only claim to fame was an accident which occurred when he was merely a baby."

"Favoritism? You mean a trumped up trial designed to promote character assassination and a basic denial of rights? Is the favoritism to which you refer?" J.S. intervened quietly, his voice deadly serious and unfriendly.

Pausing at the venom in J.S.' voice, Fudge nevertheless chose to ignore his words and continued on as though he had not spoken. "Regardless of my personal feelings regarding the matter, I assure you that everything we have committed to will be done. You will have your apology in the Prophet tomorrow—the responsibility has already been delegated to the appropriate individual, and the Prophet reporter is already on his way to the Ministry. As for Mr. Black, he will be given a trial as soon as can be arranged."

Although J.S. noted that Fudge had omitted the promise to investigate the matter of Voldemort's return, he knew he would get no more out of the man given his state of mind. The dark lord would have to be a discussion for another time—he had another purpose in this meeting today.

The matter of Sirius was really one which did not affect Fudge personally, as the travesty had occurred before Fudge's tenure had begun. J.S. knew Fudge could afford to be magnanimous in that matter. J.S. decided it was best to appear grateful for the assurances in the matter of Sirius Black—it could serve him well in the upcoming conversations which would not be quite so palatable to the English Minister.

"That is acceptable, Minister. Please keep me up to date on the status of your investigations and provide the date and time for Mr. Black to return to England. I will be certain to get him here at the appointed time."

"Very well, ambassador," Fudge replied with a wave of his hand. "Now, if there is nothing else...?"

"Actually, Minister, I do have another piece of business."

J.S. could read the annoyance, tinged with the slightest hint of apprehension in Fudge's eyes—so far, J.S.' announcements of business had been extraordinarily bad for the Minister.

"Really, ambassador," he responded in a chiding tone of voice, "I would think you had put forth enough business today to last a lifetime. Surely this can wait for another day."

"I'm afraid not, Minister. I bring you the greetings of the French Ministry today and a piece of news which will be of interest to you and will affect British – French relations."

"Very well," Fudge responded. He comported himself in a nonchalant manner, but his eyes were as hard as agates. "Please continue, although I am not certain what the French Ministry could say which would not involve their ambassador to England. Is Ambassador Tremblay out of the country right now?"

"Indeed, he is, Minister," J.S. replied, watching Fudge closely. "In fact, my business here today is to inform you that Monsieur Tremblay has accepted another post within the French Ministry. Due to this shuffle and to my qualifications and unique requirements with respect to young Harry and his continued attendance at Hogwarts, I have accepted the posting of Ambassador to England, effective immediately. The move will be officially announced to your government tomorrow."

Displeasure and anger immediately darkened Fudge's face as he glared back across the desk, causing J.S. to reflect that the Minister should have seen this coming. After all, given the events of the morning and J.S.' unique qualifications for the post, the Minister had to know J.S. did not trust him and wanted to keep a closer eye on Harry and his interactions with anyone of authority in magical Britain.

And although Fudge could not have known it of J.S., he was not the type of parent who was comfortable with sending his children off to another country for their schooling—he preferred a much closer arrangement; even if it was to a boarding school, he still wanted to reside in the same country. Unfortunately—or fortunately as the case may be—Fudge did not appear to have thought that far ahead.

"I'm not certain I can agree to this appointment, ambassador," Fudge responded finally. "The English Ministry does not particularly appreciate your heavy-handed style, and I am certain your appointment would harm relations between our two countries."

J.S. laughed out loud at this pronouncement, causing Fudge's countenance to darken even further. "On the contrary, Minister, I enjoy an excellent relationship with the Chief Warlock of your Wizengamot," he nodded at Dumbledore, who returned the gesture with aplomb, "due in part to our previous association with the ICW. I'm familiar with most of your department heads and understand your traditions and customs, having lived here some years in my youth, and I am familiar with the operation of your Ministry due to various postings and experience working with your government over the years. It seems to me I am a very good candidate for the position, Minister. It is only you who seems to have a problem with me."

"And it is my government!" Fudge snapped. "You will have to go back to your Ministry and tell them to send someone else."

"Your government?" J.S. responded with a snort of disdain. "Surely you do not consider yourself to be the government, Minister? The Minister is merely a servant of the people, is he not?"

Fudge's eyes narrowed, and his lips curled with dislike. "You can be certain I will be speaking with your Minister about this."

A slight incline of his head indicated his feelings of complete unconcern. He then infuriated Fudge even further by glancing down and making a show of inspecting his fingernails, indicating his utter contempt for the British Minister. "Be my guest, Minister. My appointment was initiated by the French Ministry with the full support of our legislative branch, so I can assure you he will confirm everything I have told you. At the end of the day, unless you have

some legal reason to deny me this posting, my government can appoint anyone they like to the post, with or without your approval."

A curt nod was the only thing which met J.S.' declaration—Fudge obviously knew he was once again painted into a corner.

"My house-elves will begin to move my family's personal belongings into the Ambassador's Manor immediately. I will be at your service by Monday morning."

The nod was repeated, and although it was obvious Fudge was not happy with the development, he at least gathered enough dignity to avoid a repeat of his objections. Not that it would do him any good.

"Which brings me to my next point," J.S. continued, turning to Dumbledore. "As my family will be living in England now, I would prefer to have all the children in my care attending the same school. As such, I would request to transfer Fleur to Hogwarts for her final year of schooling."

"Of course, ambassador," Dumbledore replied, even as the vein in Fudge's temple began to pulse. "Please have Madame Maxine provide you with a copy of Fleur's transcripts. I will instruct my deputy Headmistress to send an owl with her letter to you within the next few days. We would be happy to have the Beauxbatons champion attend our school this year."

Although he was conversing with Dumbledore, J.S. kept an eye on Fudge, watching the man's displeasure deepen as the expression of fury stole over his face. He was intelligent enough to hold his tongue this time, but it did not take a genius to understand just exactly what Fudge objected to about Fleur's attendance at England's premier school. It was time to inform the Minister of exactly how things stood.

J.S. allowed an expression of intense dislike and distaste to spread over his face as he glared at the Minister, noting the corresponding expression directed back at him. He smirked inwardly, perversely entertained at his ability to provoke a negative response in the pompous git.

"Minister, allow me to make myself rightly understood. Harry Potter is now my ward, and he and my daughter Fleur will be attending Hogwarts together this year. The ICW has voted overwhelmingly to

support Harry—and his godfather, I might add—and any attempt from you or your government to undermine him or make trouble with me or my family will lead to increased tensions with France and isolation from the rest of the wizarding world. I suggest you tread softly...

"Or perhaps it's my daughter who has set off this latest fit of temper?"

"Your daughter has no business attending Hogwarts," the Minister blustered. "Our premier school is reserved for our best and brightest students, not for some... foreign—"

"I suggest you stop right there," J.S. interrupted, his voice as cold as ice. "Do not think me ignorant of your petty British bigotry and your contempt for anyone who does not meet your pathetic standards of race and blood purity—your attempts to hide your objections behind the veneer of foreign discrimination are insulting and do not do you any favors. The fact that many of your compatriots meet your exceedingly high standards for blood purity, bigotry, and contemptible snobbishness means nothing to me—or any other right-thinking person for that matter.

"Fleur is a highly skilled and competent witch, and regardless of your narrow-mindedness, she is every bit as human as you or I. She is a champion of that cursed tournament you held in this very country for Merlin's sake!"

"And we all know how she did there!" Fudge snapped, his mouth twisted into an unpleasant sneer.

"Better, I suspect, than a squib like you would," J.S. spat, feeling an almost overwhelming urge to hex the man to oblivion.

The Minister's eyes bugged out and he appeared ready to fling another retort, but Dumbledore stepped in to try to diffuse the situation.

"Minister, ambassador, I hardly think this is constructive. Cornelius, you are well aware that Hogwarts' charter does not allow for prospective students to be discriminated against due to blood status, race, nationality, or any other factor. Legally, if I have openings available in her year—which I do—I cannot refuse Miss Delacour



entrance into our school—and I would not do so if the opportunity was there. She is a fine young woman, and you are well aware of the reasons for her performance in the tournament and the interference by Bartemius Crouch Jr. I have no doubt she will be a fine asset to Hogwarts and a pleasant addition to our ranks. Do not make this situation any more difficult by bringing up antiquated notions of blood purity or arguments regarding the status of Veela, which is what we all know this is about!"

Certain the Minister was about to burst a vein in his head, J.S. regarded the minister with an eye of complete loathing, daring the man to do his worst. It was only a short time, though, before Fudge appeared to master himself and leave well enough alone. It was the first good decision the man had made the entire day.

"Fine!" Fudge spat out. "Your daughter may attend Hogwarts with the attention seeker. Now leave me—I have much work to do."

J.S. stood, but he was unable to leave without a parting shot. He loomed over the Minister, aware his height and furious manner were intimidating to the hapless Fudge, who shrunk away in response.

"Let me be rightly understood," J.S. growled in a voice absolutely dripping with menace, "I will brook no interference by you or anyone in your government. Don't try me, Minister," the word was spat with every ounce of disdain J.S. could muster, "you will not enjoy the results."

He turned and stormed from the office and through the Minister's waiting room, beckoning to Harry as he strode past Fudge's startled assistant. Harry took one look at J.S.' face and fell in behind him meekly, but although J.S. did not want the boy to cower or feel intimidated, it was several minutes' walk down the hallways and up the stairwells of the Ministry building before his Occlumency skills were able to reassert themselves and he was able to master his towering fury toward the impotent and useless British Minister. Something would have to be done about the man, or the war was as good as lost already.

They had reached the Atrium before J.S. finally slowed down and turned to Harry, noting the expression of confused apprehension on the boy's face. He smiled at Harry to show him he was not angry, reflecting that something would also have to be done about the

boy's timidity and lack of confidence—such traits would do him no good in the face of the vile madman Voldemort.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but it appears your Minister is adept in bringing out the worst in me," J.S. commented with a wry smile.

Harry's eyes lit up in relief and he returned the smile tentatively. "I can certainly understand that, sir."

"Now, Harry," J.S. admonished, "what did we agree about calling me 'sir'?"

Harry's answering blush and stammered reply were somewhat endearing, but they were still matters of concern to the ambassador. He wondered what the boy had put up with from his so-called relatives—Sirius had only known of the situation in the most general terms. It was definitely something which demanded his immediate attention once things began to settle down.

At that moment, Dumbledore strode up to them with a thoughtful expression on his face which belied the mad twinkling of his eyes.

"Not meaning to criticize," he said with good-natured amusement, "but you do realize you just insulted and threatened a head of state?"

J.S.' answering sneer was almost feral. "Why should he be any different? The French Minister knows I will insult him too if he is being an ass!"

"Indeed," Dumbledore, shaking his head with mirth. Harry, J.S. noticed, was looking a little lost but was still grinning at the mention of Fudge being insulted.

J.S. sobered as quickly as his mirth had appeared. "What do you think the chances are that the Minister will do as he says and investigate Voldemort's return?"

"Slim," Dumbledore responded. "Alas, Fudge was once a good man and is still a passable peacetime minister, but I fear he has become too obsessed with maintaining his image and position and all the comforts, money, and adulation that go with it. It is far easier to hide

and claim it cannot be so than to do the right thing. It would surprise me if this was anything more than a stalling tactic."

J.S. nodded, expecting nothing else. "We will have to discuss this further, Headmaster, but not here." He peered around them at the bustle of the Ministry building, not trusting that any of those passing by might not be eavesdropping on him now. "I think a more private setting would be prudent."

"I presume you mean to take young Harry back to Delacour castle tonight?" Dumbledore asked with a smile at the young man.

"Yes," J.S. responded. "I think he should get used to living with us. Besides, there is someone I think he would like to see waiting for him in France."

The responding smile lit up the young man's face, and he nodded emphatically, prompting both adults to smile in an indulgent manner.

"Then we had best get your belongings, Harry," J.S. continued. "You can see Sirius tonight, and I will introduce you to the whole family. But don't worry—we will be back in England by the beginning of the week, so you can continue to see your friends."

The answering grin on Harry's face told J.S. all he needed to know—he had handled the situation properly. He knew Harry had some very good friends whom he would not want to leave behind. Hopefully, these friends of his would become close to his own daughter as well—she could use the support herself.

The short journey back to Grimmauld Place was much easier than the trip to the Ministry had been by the simple expedient of the fact that they travelled by Floo rather than the longer Muggle method which had afforded Harry so much time to brood about his situation. Although he knew he had much to consider with the events of the morning, Harry was actually grateful he was not given the time to lose himself in his thoughts—he would need more than a few minutes to assimilate the changes in his life brought about by the morning's events. Now, all he wanted to do was to see his friends and then later in the day see his godfather.

The walk through the Atrium was as uncomfortable as the walk across it that morning had been, as yet again all the attention in the massive room was directed at Harry, making him uncomfortable and edgy. The difference was that whereas in the morning those gathered had largely stared at him and whispered to each other, this time the crowd was more positive, and more than one person had called out greetings and congratulations for the outcome of the trial. He shuddered to think of what it would have been like if he had suffered through a less successful outcome to Fudge's threats. He had learned the wizarding public as a whole tended to be a fickle entity, easily persuaded by the prevailing winds of opinion and recent events, fair or not.

They stopped momentarily near the Floo connection, where Dumbledore passed J.S. a small piece of paper. After J.S. nodded, they entered the Floo one by one, Dumbledore leading, leaving the Ministry building behind them.

As with every other time he had travelled using the infernal device, Harry, following Dumbledore through the connection, ended up in a heap on the floor at their destination.

Chuckling, a newly arrived J.S. helped him to his feet. "I see I will have to teach you the proper way of travelling by Floo. We cannot have you ending up on the floor every time you use it, after all."

Harry thanked him as he stumbled to his feet, eager now to go to meet his friends and thank them for their support.

"Come, Harry—I believe everyone will be waiting for us in the parlor," Dumbledore stated, leading the way from the room.

The short walk to the parlor ended with Harry's vision being occluded by a head of rich brown hair when he was engulfed in one of Hermione's infamous hugs.

"We were so worried," she whispered in his ear, the raw emotion plain in her voice.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry whispered back, choked with his own emotion. "Your support means everything."

He pulled back and noticed her watery eyes and the way in which she attempted to keep her feelings in check. She was always there for him, no matter what. Harry was uncertain what he had possibly done to deserve such a wonderful and steadfast friend.

His ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of the youngest Weasley boys as they crowded around him congratulating him for his escape, and laughing the way people often do when their relief is manifest in an emotional manner.

Ron said nothing, merely slapping him on the back in a comradely fashion, his face beaming at his friend. The twins, though, were a different story.

"Congratulations, Harry!" one exclaimed. "Trust you to wiggle your way out of another trap."

"And come out engaged to a beautiful girl at the same time!" the other finished.

Laughs were heard around the room as Moony and Tonks, along with Bill Weasley, who Harry did not know very well, gathered around to offer their congratulations as well. Harry snuck a look at J.S., curious as to what his reaction would be toward the irreverent manner in which the twins had spoken of his daughter, but he could detect nothing in the man's demeanor which would suggest displeasure. It appeared he was enjoying the antics of Harry's friends.

Looking around, Harry spotted Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, but although they both wore smiles, those smiles appeared somewhat forced. A fully confused Harry accepted congratulations from them both. He sensed were happy that he had been exonerated, but also somewhat offended by something.

Introductions were made all around, with J.S. greeting Harry's friends cordially, before his new guardian pulled him aside and in a low voice instructed him to get his things prepared for their departure. Harry nodded and left the room, his two closest friends in tow.

"So what now, mate?" Ron asked.

Climbing the stairs, Harry turned down the long hallway and made his way toward the room he shared with Ron, glancing wistfully over the dingy house which he and his friends had spent the past week so industriously cleaning—no amount of cleaning and scrubbing seemed to be able to dent the air of oppressive gloom which pervaded the dilapidated old house.

"I'm going to France today with J.S.," Harry replied absently as they entered the bedroom. "Sirius is already there, and I'll be staying with him, J.S., and his family over the weekend."

Ron blinked. "Going to France?"

"Yeah, J.S. wants me to stay with the family and get to know them."

The reactions of his friends were a study in contrasts. Hermione's face became slightly sad, a reflection, he felt, of her unhappiness that their time together this summer would be curtailed. Ron, on the other hand, seemed a little affronted by Harry's opportunity, before his gaze narrowed slightly and his eyes flickered to Hermione and his face assumed a small smirk of satisfaction.

Controlling himself, Harry made certain he did not glance at Hermione himself—it would not do to have Ron catch such a glance. And whatever his feelings were or could have been for his best friend, his betrothal to the young French witch now put any possibility of a relationship with Hermione out of their reach. It appeared Ron had gotten what he had wished—the attention of Hermione without the interference of a competing best friend to muddy the waters. Harry did not allow himself to feel anything over the matter; he would sort it out in his own mind later.

"Good for you, mate," Ron finally stated, a sort of smugness intruding in his manner. "I'll leave you to your packing—we'll see a lot of each other at school again this year."

Slapping Harry's back yet again, Ron exited the room, never noticing the raised eyebrows and slight smirks of his best friends. As the door closed behind him, they both burst out into soft laughter, making certain to keep it quiet so Ron could not hear their amusement, as they knew he would not take being laughed, especially in a matter such as this, at very well.

"I guess he doesn't need to watch us like a hawk any more, does he?" Harry quipped irreverently.

Hermione's laughter grew louder. "I guess not," she responded with a cheeky grin.

"So, are you going to give in and go out with him?" Harry asked. His manner was nonchalant, but he knew inside that the answer to this question was important to him for some indefinable reason. Or perhaps he was simply not willing to admit the reason.

"I don't know if I like him that way," she replied after a moment's thought. "Of course, you know Ron—he may never even get around to asking."

Chuckling at her portrayal of the young redhead, Harry pulled Hermione into another hug, earning himself a surprised expression from her.

Blushing slightly at his own forwardness, Harry reached down and grabbed his trunk. Dropping it on the bed, he began to stuff some of his belongings inside its confines. His possessions were still a little meager, he thought to himself as he put Dudley's old clothes into the trunk. An internal shrug later, he deposited his school stuff and the few items of his own he had managed to collect in the trunk, thinking he had done without many possessions his entire life. Why should now be any different?

Once the action had been completed, he closed the trunk and returned his gaze to his best friend, noting the slightly unsettled expression on the face of his dearest friend.

"Hey, are you all right?" Harry asked gently.

Hermione ducked her head, causing her hair to cascade down and hide her face, but not before Harry caught the faint pink of her cheeks. "I'm fine, Harry." She raised her head again, brushed her hair back behind an ear—an action which caught Harry's attention as one that he found uncommonly attractive—and peered at her friend. "I was just hoping to spend the rest of the summer with all my friends, and now you'll be in France until school starts."

"Don't worry, Hermione. J.S. said we'll be back in England next week, so I'm sure we'll have a chance to spend time together again this summer. I'm not sure where we'll be staying, but I'm sure you could come and stay with us."

She smiled again. "I'd like that, Harry." Her mien became serious once again. "I'm glad we'll see you, but I'm concerned about you, Harry. How are you doing with all this?"

Shrugging, Harry gazed back at his friend. "It was a shock, I'll tell you that."

"You didn't know about it in advance?"

"I met J.S. for the first time this morning," Harry affirmed, "though I think I remember seeing him with Fleur during the tournament."

"But how do you feel about it?" Hermione pressed. For some reason, the answer to this question seemed important to her.

"Well, it helps that she's cute," Harry responded with a hint of a mischievous grin.

Hermione rolled her eyes and glared at him. "Honestly, Harry, is that all you boys think about? I mean, Ron's comments about suitable dates to the Yule Ball, and now you basing your future life on Fleur's looks. Do you ever think about anything else?"

"I'm I a guy, Hermione—what do you expect?" Harry responded, grinning cheekily. "You have to admit—the looks certainly do help. I mean, it could have been someone like Millicent Bulstrode or Pansy Parkinson."

The irreverent statement was completed with a theatrical shudder, causing Hermione to convulse into giggles at his antics.

"Harry James Potter! Will you be serious?"

"Well, if you insist," Harry drawled, giving her a look of long-suffering in response to her exasperation. She laughed and rolled her eyes before directing a baleful glare at him. Harry decided now might be the best time to be serious.



"To be honest," Harry mused after a moment, "I don't know what to think about it. I mean, it was done without my approval—something I'll be talking to Sirius about, I can tell you—but I'm also sure it was done with my best interests at heart. J.S. and I had a talk after the trial, and he explained some of his motivations and his concerns for Fleur, so I understand why he did it."

"You'll have to tell me about it sometime."

"Of course."

It went without saying that there would be no secrets between Hermione and himself—they had never had any in the past, and he would not start distancing himself from her now, regardless of the existence of a marriage contract.

"I suppose I just have to think of it as an opportunity to expand my horizons and make connections outside of England—an alliance with one of the premier families of France is no small matter, and it may help some day against Voldemort."

He grinned somewhat mischievously at her before continuing, "You should be proud of me; I thought of that all by myself!"

Harry ducked as Hermione swatted at him in a playful manner, grinning the entire time like a Cheshire cat.

"On the other hand," he continued, in a somewhat more serious manner than before, "I don't really know Fleur. I mean, J.S. explained a little about what her life has been like and why she is the way she is, but I have two memories of her which stand out in my mind: her snooty tone when she called me a little boy after my name came out of the goblet and the huge hug she gave me after I came out of the water with her sister. How am I to merge those two images in my head? It's almost like it was two different people."

"I understand," Hermione said with a nod. "I guess you have no choice but to get to know her."

"Yeah. That's one of the reasons why J.S. wants to go back to France tonight. He told me to ask Fleur about herself and get to know her without any preconceived notions. He didn't want to tell me about her; he wanted me to get it straight from her. He did tell me,

though, that her arrogance is a mask and that she has trouble meeting people due to being a Veela. I need to get her perspective before I can know what she is like."

"It makes sense, Harry."

"I know." He sighed and looked at the ground. "I guess I don't have a choice, do I? She's my fiancée now—I'd better get to know her."

That truth acknowledged, they sat in companionable silence for several moments. Although so much had changed in the past few hours, Harry was happy, knowing that no matter what happened, he could always count on the support of his closest friends, especially Hermione. He supposed he would eventually have to transfer his allegiance to Fleur, but for now, Hermione was by far the most important person in his life.

"So what's with Ginny and Mrs. Weasley?" he asked after a moment's thought. "They seemed offended about something."

Hermione just shook her head and gazed fondly at her friend. "Honestly, Harry, you boys are completely thick about some things, aren't you?"

"When it comes to girls, you bet," Harry shot back. "Like Ron says, 'daft—completely daft!'"

This, of course, earned him a roll of Hermione's eyes. "If you'd open your eyes once in a while, you wouldn't think that. They were mad about your change in status, dear Harry. You must have noticed Ginny has had a crush on you forever, and Mrs. Weasley has been eying you as potential son-in-law material for just as long. Longer, I would think, since she told bedtime stories of you to Ginny when she was little."

Harry's eyes felt like they were bugging out of his sockets. "Ginny?" he sputtered incredulously. "How... I mean... what... But I hardly know her! And she's never in the room long enough for me to talk to her or anything. She just squeaks and runs off!"

"And what do you think that means?"

Harry was certain his expression was comical, given Hermione's giggles, but he was not certain where she was going with this.

"She's shy? Or she doesn't like me?"

A huff of irritation met his declaration, and he got the distinct impression Hermione thought him rather slow.

"Harry, do you even use that thing on the top of your shoulders? It's amazing you can even see Ron's feelings for me."

An even more confused Harry stared open-eyed at his friend. "Come on, Hermione, Ron is obvious, considering the way he was watching us and the cow eyes he makes at you when he thinks you're not looking. Besides, he implied as much to me several times, no doubt trying to warn me off away from you."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Hermione responded, her voice flat and disapproving. "Maybe I'll need to have a talk with Mr. Weasley and let him know I don't appreciate his claim on me like I was some sort of... object or something."

That was certainly something Harry did not want to deal with—Harry had learned over the years they had been friends to stay out of Ron and Hermione's arguments, not to mention the fact that Ron would be infuriated if he knew the content of this conversation. "If you do, you heard nothing from me!"

A withering glance once again flew in his direction, but Hermione said nothing further on the subject—she merely huffed yet again and directed her gaze at Harry, her manner suggesting she considered him to be somewhat of a simpleton.

"Harry, the reason she won't say anything to you is because she has a crush on you and is too shy to be able to talk to you. She's always been completely infatuated with you and doesn't want you to get the wrong impression of her. She's been fed stories of the Boy-Who-Lived since she was a little girl, and your escapade in the chamber during your second year only solidified you in her mind as her perfect mate."

Another Boy-Who-Lived groupie, Harry thought with some disgust.

His expression must have shown his feelings, as Hermione quickly reached over and placed her hand on his wrist. "Harry, I'm not suggesting she's after you just for your fame, but she has had a crush on you for years. In time, she will probably get over her infatuation and become easier for you to get to know—I don't think she's the kind of person to be interested in you for just your fame."

Harry nodded, but he was still a little sour on the whole idea—he had had enough of people looking at him, seeing nothing more than the boy who had survived a killing curse ever since he had entered this world. He certainly did not need the little sister of one of his closest friends joining the chorus.

Still, if Hermione was convinced of Ginny's character, he supposed he could give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, it didn't really matter anymore anyway—even if Ginny was nothing more than a fan-girl, he was now betrothed.

"Thanks for the explanation, Hermione," he finally responded, regarding his friend somewhat sheepishly. "I guess I never really thought about it."

"Clueless," Hermione responded with a smirk. "You boys are clueless."

"About some things, I guess," Harry responded with a good-natured smile on his face. "But I think we'll need to continue this conversation another time—J.S. wants to get back to France. I should get going."

Although she appeared to prefer that he not have to leave so soon, Hermione nodded her agreement, and they exited the room. A short flight of stairs later, they had once again entered the parlor, where the rest of the group awaited them.

The room was quiet, with the occupants divided into several groups, all talking softly to one another—J.S. and Dumbledore along with Tonks, Moony and a recently arrived Mr. Weasley, were speaking near the Floo Connection, the twins were with Ron, and Bill was watching his brothers' antics with a slight grin on his face. Given Ron's red face and somewhat strangled voice, Harry suspected Fred and George were giving their youngest brother a rough time yet again. And in a corner furthest from the fireplace, Mrs. Weasley

and Ginny sat close together, murmuring to each other and casting reproachful looks at the other end of the room, presumably toward Harry's new guardian, if he was any judge. Harry frowned slightly at them, still not completely comfortable with the situation of which Hermione had just made him aware.

Shrugging, he put them from his mind—there would be time enough to deal with Ginny later, if indeed there was any such need. For now, it was time to leave.

With Hermione in tow, Harry crossed the room and approached the largest group in the room. "I'm ready, J.S."

"Excellent." J.S. turned to Dumbledore. "If you would, Headmaster, I would like to visit Harry's old guardians and gather whatever he has left there."

"Of course. I can Apparate you both there and then you can return and use the Floo in this house to return to the Ministry and the International Floo Network."

"Excuse me," Mrs. Weasley's voice interrupted, "but Harry was to stay with here for the rest of the summer."

Harry turned to regard his friend's mother, noting that a frown crossed J.S.' face as he did the same. Still, his voice was nothing less than cordial as he responded.

"That may have been the plan previously, Madam, but the situation has now changed. Harry will be returning to Delacour castle with me this evening and staying with his godfather and my family for the rest of the summer."

"But what about his friends?"

The tightening of J.S.' mouth was visible to Harry, but his reply was as genial as before. "I have no intention whatsoever to prohibit Harry from seeing his friends. I have accepted the position of Ambassador to England, so we will be moved here by the beginning of next week. After that, Harry will only be a Floo connection away from his friends and can visit at any time. In fact, we would be more than happy to have them stay with us whenever they would like—we are very grateful he has had such close friends to help him through his time

in Hogwarts. But for now, he will return to France with me and get to know his new family. And I think he would like to see his godfather..."

Harry blushed and returned J.S.' questioning gaze with tentative smile. "I'd like to see Sirius. And I think I should get to know Fleur as well."

The responding smile was one of genuine affection, which caused Harry to duck his head in embarrassment. But Mrs. Weasley was still not convinced.

"But surely he should be with his friends—"

"I beg your pardon, madam," J.S. interjected, cutting her off before she could get going, "but I think I am aware of what is best for my ward. Harry needs to get to know his betrothed and his new family."

"We're his family," Mrs. Weasley snapped.

The full force of J.S.' glare was now directed at the Weasley matron, and while she was clearly uncomfortable at being the focus of his displeasure, she responded gamely with a glare of her own.

"I hardly think Harry considers you his family, given what I know of the time he has spent in your company over the past several years."

She began stuttering in response, but J.S. did not allow her to get started. "Please, Mrs. Weasley, Harry has stayed with you for what—a few weeks in the summer? And I know you were gone most of the summer before his third year. He can hardly have become like another son to you in so short a time, unless you have some other reason for claiming him."

With an almost audible snap, her mouth closed, but the glower never left her face. J.S., however, appeared unconcerned.

"As I stated before, I am thankful for the efforts of your family and others of Harry's acquaintance," he nodded to Dumbledore and Remus, "for their support and assistance to Harry, but one day, Harry will be my son-in-law. At the present time, he is my responsibility and will eventually be part of my family."

His tone left no room for disagreement. Although she was still visibly upset, Mrs. Weasley nodded her head in understanding and rose from her chair, approaching Harry with a warm smile on her face.

"Harry, dear, remember we are your friends and would be happy to have you stay with us at any time. We will see you next week when you return from France."

She hugged him briefly and then, after favoring J.S. with an imperious glance, stalked out of the parlor. Harry smiled at J.S.' raised eyebrow, indicating his readiness to depart. Saying a quick goodbye to his friends, he gathered his trunk and followed him out down the hallway and through the front door, eager to see Sirius and start his new life.

## Chapter 4 – Plots and Conversations

The general public, especially the wizarding public, was at best a rather capricious entity. What was popularity and adulation one day was no guarantee of the same in the next, no matter the stature of the individual in question.

Harry Potter was a prime example of the changeable nature of the opinion of the masses. Revered for an event he could not even remember, Harry Potter entered Diagon Alley as an eleven-year-old to the adulation of the masses he had not only never met, but also had not even known of before that day. His entrance into the hallowed halls of Hogwarts was no different, generating whispers and pointed fingers, not to mention cheers from Gryffindor house when he had been sorted there and groans from all the others.

Yet by the middle of his second year, the cheers and shouts of acclamation had turned to angry mutters and rumors of his complicity in the Chamber of Secrets fiasco. But once the mystery of the chamber had been solved, his entry back into the good books of the masses had been immediate—at least until his entry into the Tri-Wizard Tournament, where he had been branded an attention seeker and glory hound.

Truly, as Harry had mused only that morning, it was not only tough at times to be Harry Potter, but it was also difficult being anyone who was in the public eye.

Of course, the Minister of Magic was no exception to this rule—in fact the masses traditionally had a love/hate relationship with the Minister. As with the coach of a professional Quidditch team, the prevailing attitude amongst the Minister's supporters tended to be, "What have you done for me lately?"

Cornelius Fudge sat in the comfortable confines of his office, deliberating over the injustices which were sometimes heaped upon the shoulders of the Minister in general and himself in particular.

As a new Minister, Fudge had generally enjoyed good popularity, in part, whether he admitted it or not, because he was not Millicent Bagnold. Not that the previous Minister was reviled—far from it. But she had always been perceived as a gruff, no-nonsense type who was a stickler for the rules, and she had governed with an eye



toward improving the wizarding government so it more fully represented the people it purported to serve. In short, she was considered a progressive reformer. While this would normally have been a position which would have endeared her to the masses, Bagnold's style of governance was closely mirrored by her personality—at least, by what personality she actually possessed, some cynics were known to remark. It was truly a shame she had had virtually no people skills, as a bit of charisma could have allowed her to connect closer to the populace and created a much more effective engine for change in the British wizarding world.

Unfortunately, she had not an ounce of charisma, which was why although her policies generally made her administration a friend of the people, she herself had never really enjoyed a great deal of popularity. And, of course, her policies had made her an enemy of the Pureblood faction, as their ideals supported only one thing: their own agenda, which was concerned with nothing more than improving their own lot to the detriment of all others. Although small in number, a disproportionate percentage of the wealth in the wizarding world rested in the hands of the Purebloods, rendering them the most powerful faction in Britain. Even more importantly, however, was the fact that the seats of the Wizengamot were all hereditary and, once again, largely held by old Pureblood families.

The result of this was that Bagnold, although she had had a certain amount of success in pushing through her more progressive agenda, had been thwarted in much of her endeavors by a hostile Wizengamot. Even Dumbledore, once he had become Chief Warlock, had only been able to provide so much assistance. Eventually, she had resigned and left the country, tired of fighting the constant battle against a foe who was implacable and capable of using its massive wealth and influence to maintain as much of the status quo as possible.

Enter Fudge and the nature of the Ministry had changed. Although Fudge had campaigned on a platform which was somewhat more conservative than the one over which Bagnold had presided for the previous ten years, he had privately made it known to certain Wizengamot members that he was open for business—translation: his support and policies could be bought by anyone who was willing to provide a... pecuniary incentive. As only the members of the Wizengamot had a vote for the next Minister, the above had perhaps been Fudge's greatest political maneuver—the combination of those

members who felt he would slow down the changes to their society to a more manageable level and those who knew they could buy his support for the right amount of Galleons had been enough to tip the scales and ensure his election.

Unfortunately, he had been in office less than six months before it was generally understood that he was a lame duck Minister, one who had no agenda whatsoever beyond the acceptance of massive bribes in return for his interference in the business of all branches of his government.

Of course, his greatest contributor had always been the Malfoy family, which seemed to have money to burn. Lucius Malfoy had paid him bribes for everything from the support of his extremist bills presented before the Wizengamot (necessary due to the fact that the Malfoy family, although extremely wealthy, were of French descent and had no seat) to buying Fudge's obstruction of various departments who may otherwise have been investigating his family's activities.

Of course, it completely escaped Fudge's attention that Malfoy really did not need Fudge at all—Malfoy's Pureblood friends on the Wizengamot were able to introduce his proposed laws and actions without the assistance of the Minister if he so chose. If Fudge had ever thought to look into the matter, he would have noticed that many of the actions which he sponsored were defeated, and he would have come to the conclusion that often he was used as a decoy.

Or perhaps Fudge would not have cared even then—his primary concern, of course, was always the money which made its way from Malfoy's vault and into his own. Whether Malfoy succeeded or not really meant nothing to the Minister—all that mattered to Fudge was that he was paid well for what he did.

On this day, however, Fudge felt his popularity had fallen to an all-time abyss, what with his failed persecution of young Harry Potter. It was a valuable lesson to learn—before taking on one of the nation's greatest heroes, you needed to make certain you had an airtight case. Especially when said hero was being supported by another.

That Dumbledore had staged the entire session with that despicable French wizard was beyond contradiction in Fudge's opinion. And

worse, Fudge felt it was all calculated to make him look as bad as they possibly could—and in that endeavor, they had succeeded in spades.

What bothered Fudge was that he was uncertain exactly just what Dumbledore's aims were. Was he merely trying to get the Potter brat off, or was he aiming for something more? Had he designs on the Minister's office for himself or one of his cronies? The fact that the Minister's office had been Dumbledore's for the taking when Bagnold resigned (if he'd only declared his candidacy rather than refusing due to lack of interest and contentment with his current position) did not occur to the Minister.

No, Fudge was certain that Dumbledore was up to something and that whatever it was, it could not be beneficial for Fudge's long-term residence in the Minister's office.

Two can play that game! Fudge snarled to himself.

It was time to fight back.

"Minister? Minister, did you hear me?"

Fudge blinked and focused his eyes. Across his desk sat the annoying pink woman whose grating high-pitched voice had interrupted his ruminations. Umbridge was a menace, but he had promoted her for one reason only—she blindly fell in with whatever schemes he promoted, if only to further her own agenda of bigotry and hate, something which although Fudge did not espouse, he had no particular disliking for either. Unfortunately, despite her usefulness, he could only take her in small doses, as her voice was aggravating and her constant harping was not especially conducive to his own agenda of enriching himself.

"I'm sorry, Madam Undersecretary—I'm afraid my mind wandered for a moment. What were you saying?"

She gave Fudge an imperious glare. "I had finished my report on the plans for my time at Hogwarts, Minister. But I believe I may have a plan to deal with the Delacour girl before the next school year starts."

Privately, Fudge doubted she could do anything to influence the Veela's attendance in any way, but he had not stayed in power as long as he had by ignoring the schemes of his underlings. He motioned for her to continue, nodding thoughtfully and responding in monosyllables when she seemed to be expecting it.

All in all, it was something which might have succeeded if it had been thought of several months ago. In today's environment, though, Fudge was certain she would have difficulty pulling it off—Dumbledore would crush her without a second thought.

Yet anything which diverted Dumbledore's attention was welcome in Fudge's opinion. For him, the main thrust was her installment at Hogwarts as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, and the slow and careful way in which he would have her take over the school... that would have to be handled with delicacy. The fact that Umbridge had no true mastery of the subject and had indeed been an indifferent and pampered student at best when she had attended did not even enter into the equation in Fudge's eyes. Her use to him in the school was to find a way to have Dumbledore removed and to ensure Fudge was not challenged as Minister.

Of course, the scheme she had come up with to deal with this most vexing news of the Delacour girl's entrance into Hogwarts would be annoying for his opponents, although a little ham-fisted. He immediately threw his support behind her endeavors.

"Very well, Undersecretary, you have my permission to proceed," Fudge responded magnanimously. "Thank you for your time and efforts."

Umbridge's answering smile was most unpleasant, and Fudge shuddered as she scurried from the office. The woman made even him uncomfortable!

In the north of England, an old manor building stood. It was the old estate manor of some landowner long forgotten in the mists of time, a reminder of the way things had once been in the kingdom. The building was still standing and in relatively good shape, which was surprising considering the years of neglect and indifference it had suffered. If one looked closely enough, a hint of its former glory could still be seen in the chipped and cracked marble floors and in

the faded and peeling wallpaper—it had obviously been the home of some family of wealth and consequence.

Now, it was the home to people of a much less savory reputation. The newly reconstituted dark lord Tom Marvolo Riddle, or the self-styled Voldemort, now made the old house his base of operations.

Voldemort was indifferent as to his surroundings or the state of the old house—if things had been different, he could just as easily have made the manor of his Riddle ancestors his home. Unfortunately, the escape of Harry Potter from the Little Hangleton cemetery and the house's proximity to the site of his rising meant the location was now compromised, necessitating his removal and relocation. It was an irritant, no more, no less, and the dark lord knew there were better things with which to concern himself than creature comforts and the location of his lair. Soon, the British wizarding world would be his once again, and locations such as this crumbling, ramshackle old building would mean nothing to him.

His minions were currently out doing his bidding, all except the groveling fool Pettigrew, who was now in an upstairs room keeping watch for any hint of trouble. Voldemort did not think anyone would find him here, but he had not become one of the most feared and hated men in the history of the wizarding world by being careless.

Left to his own devices, the dark lord immediately settled into one of the things he did best—he plotted and pondered his next moves.

This new news of French involvement with Harry Potter was troubling. Not that he had expected Fudge's persecution (at Lucius' urging, of course) to succeed—on the contrary, he had firmly expected Dumbledore to crush the Minister's initiative with little or no trouble. The manner in which Fudge's defeat had occurred had been unexpected, though, and although Voldemort had no proof whatsoever, he was certain the way it had played out had been orchestrated by Dumbledore for some particular purpose which Voldemort was not yet able to see. After all, Dumbledore had allowed this French ambassador to do most of the talking and the tearing apart of Fudge's arguments, and though it was possible that age was finally catching up to the old man, Voldemort did not think that was the case. Dumbledore had not gotten to where he was today by being a political lightweight, and Voldemort knew he had to

assume Dumbledore was in command of his faculties unless otherwise proven.

The dark lord bared his lips in an unsightly sneer. Voldemort's own rise to power had certainly not been characterized by incompetence—even his enemies were willing to allow him that much. Dumbledore was a worthy opponent—he would definitely have to be removed in order to ensure Voldemort's ultimate victory.

No, whatever Dumbledore was playing at, Voldemort was certain it had been planned and executed meticulously, with nothing left to chance, which meant that Dumbledore had some purpose in orchestrating the incident. Did it have to do with bringing the French into the conflict as allies, or did he have some other more... esoteric purpose which the dark lord had yet to discover?

No matter—eventually Dumbledore would be forced to tip his hand, and the dark lord would be ready for him. Besides, two could play at that game—Voldemort was certain there were just as many discontented Purebloods in France as there were in Britain.

The problem of Potter was a tricky one; twice now he had defied and defeated, or at the very worst escaped, from a fully constituted dark lord at the height of his powers. It was troubling to say the least. Perhaps there was more to the prophecy which Voldemort had not considered yet. Perhaps there was more to it than he had been led to believe. It would bear some further thought.

As for the meddling foreigner, he would have to be taught in the harshest manner possible about the perils of involving himself in a matter which was not of his concern. A message would have to be sent, an indication of what would happen if he continued on his course of supporting the boy—it was imperative that Harry Potter be as isolated from the rest of the wizarding world as possible. Malfoy's job was to sow the seeds, in the matter of the trial, among other plans, of young Harry's disenchantment from the general public. That was the most important consideration right now.

Yes, a message would be sent—one to strike fear in the hearts of his enemies. He would have to speak to Lucius and arrange it. The dark lord smiled unpleasantly—they would again learn to fear the name of Voldemort.

Dumbledore apparated them to a small park not far from the Dursleys' home, and once they had ensured their arrival had not been witnessed, the Dumbledore and J.S. shook hands and the Headmaster disappeared away.

Smiling at Harry, J.S. motioned for him to lead the way to his relatives' house, noting with a frown the look of trepidation which appeared on Harry's face.

"I don't think I've left anything behind," Harry began softly, his eyes never meeting J.S.' face. "Maybe we could go straight to France?"

Regarding his ward, J.S. thought again about his scant knowledge of Harry's life with his relatives, understanding that this reaction was more evidence of the fact that it had not been a good life. Whatever Harry's reservations were, they would need to be addressed and the effects of them resolved so his future son-in-law could move on with his life.

"Perhaps not," J.S. replied, "but I would prefer to make certain. In any case, we should at least inform them of your change in status and let them know you will never live with them again."

"Like they care," Harry muttered under his breath—J.S. had to strain to hear Harry's words, frowning when he realized the implications. He would need to find out sooner rather than later the details of Harry's upbringing.

Turning with some abruptness, Harry began walking down the street, prompting J.S. to pursue him. "They won't like us showing up, sir," he said, his voice quiet. "They've never wanted to have anything to do with my world before."

"Do not worry, Harry. I can deal with them. They cannot be any worse than dealing with Fudge."

Harry threw a wry grin back at his companion, and they chuckled together, J.S. happy he had been able to release the tension in his charge.

The distance was short, and soon they arrived at a sleepy-looking street. A row of Muggle houses met J.S.' gaze, and although the area appeared to be a little older, the houses were generally neat

and in good repair. It was like any other Muggle neighborhood, with nothing that suggested it was anything out of the ordinary—of course, it had housed the most famous wizard in magical Britain for the first fifteen years of its life, which made it remarkable, to the wizarding world at least.

The house to which Harry led them was as commonplace as the rest—it looked comfortable, but not overly large, and it had well manicured lawns and foliage in good repair.

They went to the front door, at which Harry raised his hand and knocked, an action which surprised J.S. He would have thought, having lived there for many years, Harry would just walk in the front door, but it appeared that either something had happened which had revoked his rights to such an action, or he had never really felt welcome in the house.

At length, the door swung open, revealing a young boy about Harry's age. Though J.S. knew he must be Harry's cousin, there was virtually no family resemblance, as the boy was stocky to Harry's rather slender frame—the two also had very different features.

"Hi, Dud," Harry greeted the young man somewhat diffidently.

The young man's eyes narrowed and he glanced over his shoulder in a furtive manner. "Harry, what are you doing here?"

"We've come to pick up my things and talk to your Mum and Dad," Harry said, his voice quavering slightly in nervousness.

"Dad doesn't want you here anymore. He said you're not welcome here."

J.S. decided it was time to intervene. "Mr. Dursley, I assure you we will not be staying long. I simply need to speak with your parents, after which Harry and I will leave. Will you please call them?"

Dudley appeared to consider this momentarily before opening the door fully and motioning for them to follow him. "You can sit in the living room—I'll call Mum and Dad," he said over his shoulder.



Following Harry, J.S. entered the house. A short walk through the entranceway brought them to a comfortable living area filled with Muggle gadgets. As a Pureblood, J.S. had grown up in the wizarding world, but he had more knowledge about the Muggle world than most of his contemporaries. After all, they shared the world with Muggles and were vastly outnumbered by them—it seemed only prudent to know about them and their customs.

They took a seat on a couch, and it was only moments before an enormous man with a walrus mustache and a thin woman with dark hair entered into the room. Their faces clearly showed their anger, but they kept their temper in check with some effort.

"Boy! I told you when you left that you were no longer welcome in this house, and now you're bringing your freak friends with you?"

J.S.' face went stony, and he regarded the fat man as though he were a slug. "Mr. Dursley, I presume?"

The fat man grudgingly nodded his head and glared at them. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get out!"

"Mr. Dursley, I am Jean-Sebastian Delacour, and believe me, nothing will please me more than to take Harry away from here and never return," J.S. responded, his voice the icy chill of a winter wind. "But Harry's circumstances have changed, and I think you have a right to know. Shall we sit and discuss this like adults?"

"We don't care what happens to the freak," Mrs. Dursley spoke up with some distaste. "Our Dudders was almost killed by those creatures. Having him here is dangerous."

A scornful laugh escaped J.S.' lips and he stood and turned the full force of his glare on the bad-mannered couple. "Do you really think you could stop Dumbledore if he decided Harry needed to stay here again?"

The woman's face became white at his suggestion, while the fat man's face purpled in anger. "We don't care! Get out!"

"Sit down!" J.S. thundered, whipping out his wand and pointing it at them. They paled and muttered but sat as asked, although their faces still showed the petulant anger of truly small-minded people.

"Now, we will sit down and converse like rational adults," J.S. enunciated clearly. "There will be no further outbursts about 'freaks' or any of the other names you have called Harry over the years."

His voice was stern and uncompromising, and although J.S. had the impression Harry's relatives had rarely been spoken to in such a manner, they grudgingly nodded their heads in assent while stealing apprehensive glances at his wand, which was still held in his hand.

"Thank you. I understand there was an incident this summer before Harry left your care."

At their nods, J.S. continued. "He has been exonerated for his actions during that incident, but due to certain circumstances, his guardianship has changed, and he will no longer be required to live with you."

He witnessed as the man and woman exchanged a glance with each other, triumphant grins passing across their face.

"Good!" the woman finally exulted. "We never wanted the little fre... our nephew to live with us anyway—that Headmaster of his forced him on us and we had no choice."

"We want nothing further to do with your strange world!" the man continued, his voice forceful and unpleasant. "You people aren't natural, and his parents weren't any better. We'll be happy to be rid of him!"

J.S. leaned back and studied the three of them for a moment, feeling more resignation and annoyance at their attitude than any true anger—he had seen this behavior many times, although since he was a magical, he had usually seen magicals disparaging Muggles rather than the reverse. Still, it did not take a genius to see the blatant bigotry and hatred these people harbored for something they could not possibly understand. It was good that J.S. had intervened when he had, as this life could not have been comfortable for Harry.

Glancing sidelong at his new ward, J.S. considered the situation and wondered if the situation had been what he had seen here, or if the Dursleys had been more... physical in their treatment of the young boy. His eyes narrowed as he saw Harry's slumped posture and the

way he would not meet his relatives' eyes. It was difficult to tell, but J.S. determined he would get to the bottom of it and swore that these ignorant people would pay if they had abused Harry.

In the interim of J.S.' thoughts, silence had stretched on in the room, a silence which had clearly become uncomfortable for the couple sitting opposite, although their son did not seem to mind—he was openly gazing at his cousin, as though he had never truly seen him before. It was petty, but J.S. took a perverse amount of pleasure in their unease, allowing the silence to continue as he merely gazed at the couple, his contempt showing in his expression which was tinged with distaste.

"Should you not be thanking your nephew for his actions?" he queried at last. "If not for Harry's actions, your son would have been killed by those Dementors."

"And if he wasn't here, your freaky creatures would never have been here either," Mr. Dursley snarled in response. "He's been nothing but trouble since he showed up, and we're well rid of him."

"He did save me, dad," Dudley spoke up suddenly.

From the looks Dudley received from not only his father and mother but also Harry, J.S. deduced that Dudley backing Harry up was an uncommon, if not unheard of, event. The young man, however, ignored the looks he was receiving from his parents and kept his gaze focused on Harry, an earnest and almost pleading expression on his features. Harry returned his gaze with a questioning one of his own, before finally relaxing and slumping slightly in his seat with a half smile on his face.

"Don't worry about it, Dud. It was no problem."

Mr. Dursley's snort met Harry's statement, but Harry ignored it, seeming to be relieved and somewhat happier over the situation. J.S. strongly suspected he was happy to have finally received some measure of approbation from at least one of his relatives, even if it had been bought at the price of a life-threatening situation.

"Mr. Dursley, I fully understand you would like us to leave, so I'll get right to the point. I am not impressed with what I've seen here today and what I've heard about Harry's home life—you clearly know

nothing about nurturing a young man properly, and if I didn't consider you to be worth nothing more than an ant to crush beneath my boots, I might take offense to the things you have said today."

Mrs. Dursley paled, while her husband's face purpled in anger, but J.S. ignored them. "Be that as it may, I am happy to say that Harry will never have to suffer your presence again. I will certainly never allow him to return here, and I cannot imagine him ever wanting to return once he comes of age."

A single glance at Harry, showing the boy's slightly anxious expression and furtive glances in the direction of the front door, told him what he already knew—Harry would undoubtedly be quite happy to never return to his relatives' house again.

"But be that as it may, I felt it only prudent to advise you of the change in Harry's status and the fact that he will not be returning. He is now betrothed to my daughter and will be my ward until his own is once again fit to resume his duties. Therefore, he will not be requiring your hospitality any longer."

"Once a freak, always a freak," Mr. Dursley responded with a sneer. "Imagine! Magic and betrothals! It's all freakiness, I tell you!"

His beady eyes fixed on Harry, and an unpleasant leer came over his face. "So, you had to go and get someone else to get you a betrothal to get yourself a girl, did you, boy? Couldn't get a girl on your own with your freakiness? I bet she's short and warty—a true witch!"

Mr. Dursley's laugh grated on J.S.' nerves, but he said nothing, merely removing a Muggle-style picture from his wallet and enlarging it until it was the size of a large painting. "This is my daughter, Fleur, who is now engaged to Harry. I don't think she has any warts, to the best of my knowledge. However, she may turn you into a toad if you were to suggest such a thing to her face, so I suggest you keep your opinions firmly to yourself."

The mouths of all three Dursleys dropped as they gazed at the picture of his daughter, causing J.S. to chuckle in response—as a father, he was proud of his daughters' beauty and Veela heritage, even while he had worried about the effect that heritage would have

on potential suitors. Harry was truly a godsend to the French ambassador.

After a moment, Mr. Dursley turned red and he began to stutter with rage while his wife regarded Harry as if she had never seen him before. The youngest Dursley could hardly take his eyes off the picture, although he did glance at Harry with a new respect in his eyes.

Shrinking the picture once again and replacing it in his wallet, J.S. regarded the abysmal family with some distaste. "Once we leave this place, it will be up to Harry as to whether or not you will ever see him again. When he comes of age, I will leave that decision up to him."

"Just take him and go," Mr. Dursley said in a gruff tone of voice once he had recovered somewhat from his anger. "The only thing that will make us happy is if we don't have to deal with you lot again."

"We will, Dursley," J.S. responded. "But I also feel it necessary to warn you as well."

Dursley passed a weary hand over his face. "Why can't you freaks just take a hint and understand where you're not wanted? We didn't want to have anything to do with him," Dursley jabbed a finger at Harry, "but your Headmaster wouldn't hear of anything else. We wanted him to live normally without all his parents' freakiness, but we were forced to send him to that school. Why do you people insist on doing this to us?"

Astonished at the rudeness and tenacity of this man, J.S. was tempted to do exactly what he asked—leave them to their fate. However, his sense of responsibility demanded he deliver his message before he quit the place entirely. Besides, Dumbledore had convinced J.S. that regardless of the Dursleys' worthiness as guardians or their worth as human beings, they deserved to be warned, due to the fact that they were Harry's relations.

"Mr. Dursley, are you familiar with the story of Lord Voldemort?"

Mrs. Dursley gasped. "Wasn't he that madman who was after Lily?"

J.S. inclined his head. "He was after the whole family, yes, but more specifically after Harry, I suspect."

Although his wife seemed to understand what J.S. was talking about, Mr. Dursley appeared to be completely at a loss. "What are you talking about?"

"Lily told me about him before she died," Mrs. Dursley told her husband. "He was after them for some reason or another—he's the one who killed them."

With a grunt, Dursley glared across at the two wizards. "What about him? He died back then—what does he have to do with anything now?"

Turning to Harry, J.S. raised an eyebrow at Harry.

"They don't want to hear anything I have to say," Harry muttered defensively. "Even if I tried to tell them, they wouldn't have listened."

Turning back to the Dursleys, J.S. sized them up. He suspected they might not give any weight to what he was about to tell them, but he decided it was on their heads if they did not. He could only warn them—they would need to do the rest.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, we are here today not only to tell you that Harry will be leaving your residence but also to warn you that you may be in danger if you stay here. This Voldemort who tried to kill Harry when he was a baby has recently returned, and if he learns of your relationship with Harry, he may try to get to Harry through you. Now, you and I both know that there are virtually no familial feelings between you and your nephew, but Voldemort certainly will not know that."

"But he died!" Mr. Dursley scoffed. "Would you have us fear a dead man?"

"He did not die," J.S. responded evenly. "Through unknown means, he managed to cheat his fate and has recently returned to Britain, intent on picking up where he left off. When he left Harry here as a baby, Dumbledore erected a set of protections which not only kept young Harry safe but also kept you and your family safe. But a condition of these protections is that he must be present for part of

the summer for them to be effective. With Harry moving away, he will not be returning next year to reset the wards, which means they will fade away some time next summer. Once that happens, this house will be visible once again to the magical world, and if Voldemort ever makes the connection between Harry and your family, you will all be in great danger."

"I'm sure we can reason with him if he does show up," Mr. Dursley claimed rather nonchalantly. "If he hates the boy as much as we do, I'd think he would award us a medal for getting him out of the house."

"Vernon, I think we should consider the warning," his wife spoke up, her eyes bright with fear.

"Frankly, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, it matters little to me if you heed the warning or not," J.S. replied with a shrug. "I have done my duty. But I strongly suggest you listen to me and take steps to protect your family—Voldemort does not reason with or reward Muggles... he kills them. It is your choice, but I urge you not to underestimate him. Harry and I will collect his remaining belongings and leave you now."

Rising to his feet, J.S. motioned for Harry to precede him from the room, but they were interrupted by Dudley's fearful voice.

"There isn't anything of Harry's left here. After he left last week, Dad got rid of it all."

J.S.' eyes flashed and he turned on Vernon. "You discarded Harry's possessions?"

Vernon paled and seemed to sink back in his seat, his eyes darting from side to side. His fear would almost have been amusing if J.S. had not been so thoroughly disgusted with the man who had provided Harry with such a dismal childhood environment.

"It's okay," Harry said, his manner somewhat resigned. "I make sure I take everything that means anything to me when I leave after summer hols. All I had left were a few old clothes and some odds and ends."

Turning to regard his ward, J.S. searched his eyes, looking for some hint of anything other than the resignation which had been so

evident in Harry's voice—if the boy had lost anything of value to Dursley's "housecleaning", he would have it out of their hides. Once again, J.S. noticed the somewhat tattered and oversized state of Harry's clothes, which he had assumed was some Muggle fashion statement, but now he was not certain. Then, there was the single trunk of his possessions, which he clutched tightly in his hand. Whatever the Dursleys had or had not done to Harry, they had certainly not provided a suitably nurturing environment to the young man, and knowing that filled him with rage. But he checked his temper and glared down at the elder Dursleys with contempt.

"Very well—we will be taking our leave now. I have never witnessed such complete disdain and criminal negligence in a couple responsible for the upbringing and wellbeing of a young man in my life. You, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, should be in prison for what you have done! Do not ever attempt to contact Harry again—you will not appreciate the consequences!"

Motioning to Harry, J.S. swept from the room with Harry close on his heels. They had walked no more than a few steps when they heard a voice calling to them.

J.S. turned and looked at the heavysset bulk of Harry's cousin. Seeing with a glance that Harry was regarding his cousin curiously, he felt it would do little harm to let them speak before they left.

Dudley shifted from foot to foot nervously while covertly watching Harry out of the corner of his eye. He seemed to want to say something, but for whatever reason was uncertain—or unwilling—to come to the point.

"What is it, Dud?"

The sound of the young man's voice seemed to startle him out of his reverie. "Harry... I wanted... Oh, hang it all—I'm not very good at this."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before visibly screwing up his courage and addressing his cousin. "I just wanted to say... I know I haven't treated you well, but... Thanks for saving me from those ghost thingies..."



Harry smiled at his cousin, a smile which actually seemed to reach his eyes—somewhat surprising if half of what J.S. suspected about his time with his cousin was true. "It's okay, Dudley. I couldn't just leave you behind. Don't think anything of it."

"I think a lot of it, Harry," Dudley contradicted. "The way I've treated you, I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd left me in the dust."

Harry did not appear to know what to say—after a moment's thought, he again smiled. "You're welcome."

"And Harry... don't listen to what dad says about you. You're no freak. Wherever you're going, I hope I can see you again... sometime..."

"I'd like that, Dudley," Harry said again. "Maybe when this is all over I'll look you up sometime."

Although he was certain Harry would have denied it, he thought he detected the hint of tears in Harry's eyes—obviously, finally being offered a hint of acceptance from one of his relatives was affecting Harry more than he was letting on.

Dudley nodded his agreement to Harry's offer and then turned his attention to J.S. and ducked his head. "Please take care of my cousin, Mr. Delacour."

Inclining his head, J.S. directed a smile at the young man. "I will. Thank you for your words here, Mr. Dursley—it takes a lot of courage to admit when you've been wrong. Please convince your father to take the warning seriously," he continued with a stern expression on his face. "If you don't, the consequences could be disastrous."

Dudley nodded, and after shuffling forward and shaking Harry's hand awkwardly, he disappeared back into the house, leaving behind one bemused wizard and a confused young man whom J.S. suspected felt somewhat better about his relatives than he did before.

They left the house, walking down the block back to the park, but instead of finding the secluded spot they had arrived in before, J.S. directed Harry to a bench, intent on getting some answers from him

before they went any further. Harry seemed somewhat confused, but he allowed himself to be guided and then sat down, waiting for further instructions. J.S. flicked his wand, setting up a few charms to ensure their privacy, before turning his attention on the young man.

"Harry," he began, not wanting the boy to become uncomfortable with a long silence, "I wanted to speak with you about your time with your relatives."

Harry's face assumed a defensive expression, and J.S. could almost imagine he saw an extra mask come over his eyes, hiding his feelings behind them.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it, J.S.," he finally responded. "I'm never going back there, so there's no point."

"Harry, you may have come to believe such ill treatment was something that you deserved, but believe me, the Dursleys' behavior is just short of criminal. You don't have to tell me anything which makes you uncomfortable, but I want to know what things were like for you and take the appropriate actions if necessary."

Silence reigned for the next few moments as Harry seemed to retreat into himself. The expression of anguish on his features and the way he wrung his hands nervously tugged at J.S.' heartstrings, but he was determined to give his young ward the space and time to discover his feelings on his own. If the situation was as J.S. suspected, he promised he would have the Dursleys' hides hung on his wall.

"What's the point?" Harry finally asked as he glanced up. "It's done, and there's nothing we can do about it. I would prefer to just move on and forget about them."

"And what good is that?" J.S. asked pointedly. "Harry, you may not believe you're worth the effort, but I intend to take the time to convince you that you are. And if your relatives never pay the price for their crimes, are they really learning anything? What of their own son? Will they do the same to him?"

"You don't have worry about their little Duddykins," Harry muttered.

Lifting an eyebrow, J.S. thought back to the encounter, remembering the way the couple had spoken of and referred to their son, and he reflected, somewhat ruefully, that Harry was probably right—Dudley had likely been treated like a prince by his parents. Of course, their treatment of their own son obviously created its own problems in their son's sense of entitlement and his becoming spoiled, but that really was not J.S.' concern. Such an inequality of their situations must have made Harry's childhood all the worse, knowing that he had been singled out.

J.S. sat there regarding Harry, allowing him time to sort through his feelings and find his words while at the same time presenting a calm yet implacable front to the young man—he would have an accounting of Harry's relatives.

At length, Harry began speaking. He was somewhat reluctant and unsure, and although his manner was hesitant, once he started, the words began to come in a torrent. Yet though the subject matter was emotional and the actions of his relatives had hurt him immensely, his face was a stony mask and his voice was emotionless—J.S. knew he had learned to protect himself from his relatives' neglect by holding his emotions in check and not admitting they had hurt him. It was something they would have to work on changing—Harry would certainly never face such attitudes in his family.

The story Harry weaved was heartbreaking—it was one of a lonely, miserable child who could not understand what he had done to deserve the contempt and ridicule to which he was subjected on a daily basis. The story was one of emotional abuse, where the words "freak", "worthless" and "unwanted" figured prominently in the boy's upbringing. Harry spoke of growing up living in a cupboard under the stairs, moving out of said closet and into his cousin's second bedroom after receiving a letter from Hogwarts, only because the Dursleys worried what Dumbledore would do when he found out his living circumstances. Of course, he was not allowed to remove the pile of discarded and broken old toys which took up the majority of his new room. No, little Duddykins was not finished with them, so they had to stay.

According to Harry, he had started cooking the family meals at an early age and ended up doing the bulk of the household chores while his cousin sat on his lazy behind, planning his latest round of bullying. He had never had a Christmas present from them, whereas

his cousin had been buried in a veritable mountain of presents, and he had been told that freaks did not have birthdays, while again his cousin was treated as if he were a prince.

He spoke of odd things happening to him, things which he could not understand, but of which his relatives must have known due to their knowledge of his parents' abilities. Yet nothing was ever explained—instead, he was punished whenever anything happened which could not be explained while his relatives lied to him, telling him he was the spawn of drunkards who were killed in a car accident, blaming them for the scar he now wore on his forehead.

As horror after horror was spoken in that same emotionless monotone, still, J.S. reflected, there was something missing from Harry's tale. The young man fell silent, and J.S. determined he would discover whether or not Harry was hiding anything from him.

"Thank you for trusting me with your story, Harry," J.S. told him, showing the young man a smile of compassion. "But, Harry, I need to know something. Your relatives treated you abominably, but you haven't said anything about physical mistreatment. Did your uncle ever beat you?"

His eyes widened and he began shaking his head vigorously. "No, he never did anything like that. I mean, there were some times I thought he was so mad he would, but he never did. Maybe he was afraid of what I could do to him when I grew up or something."

"And your cousin?"

Harry laughed bitterly. "Dudley's favorite game was called 'Harry hunting'. He and his gang used to terrorize the neighborhood and vandalize whatever they could without getting caught. I learned very quickly to be much faster than Dudley and very good at hiding—otherwise, I'd get a beating. But he never hit me hard enough to leave a permanent mark and was careful to never leave any kind of mark where it would show. He didn't want my school teachers to know about the bullying."

J.S. digested all this, reflecting it was better than he would have thought or hoped. The mental abuse in some ways was worse than if they had physically abused him, but if they had beat him, then nothing would have prevented J.S. from exacting a stiff price for

their actions. As it was, he was inclined to leave well enough alone—Harry was physically undamaged after all, and it would not do to drag up further painful memories for the young man. Instead, he would focus on helping Harry rehabilitate his sense of self worth—something which he knew would be difficult yet ultimately rewarding. It was amazing how well he had turned out, given the adversities he had faced in his life—J.S. would have understood if he had grown into a bitter and vengeful young man, yet nothing was further from the truth. He was as pleasant a young man as J.S. had ever had the good fortune to meet.

"Harry, I want you to know something."

The young man's eyes flickered up to meet his, but his expression remained placid, waiting for J.S. to come to the point.

"That part of your life is over, and I will never bring it up again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harry responded.

J.S. raised an eyebrow at the young man, prompting him to flush with embarrassment. "J.S..." he amended sheepishly.

"That's better. Just remember, Harry, I will not bring it up, but that does not mean you cannot. If you ever want to talk about it or ask my advice, I will always be available for you, and for that matter, Sirius can help too."

"Thanks J.S.," Harry replied with considerable feeling.

"You're welcome, Harry," J.S. said, his mouth rising in a warm smile. He had only met Harry that day, and already he was developing a fondness for the polite and serious young man. If the stories he had heard of Harry's time in Hogwarts to this point were any indication, life with Harry Potter certainly would not be dull.

That evening, Hermione Granger was sitting on the bed in her room considering the events of the day when Ginny stepped into their shared bedroom. Knowing as she did Ginny's obsession with the Boy-Who-Lived, Hermione was not surprised that the announcement from earlier that day had been a shock and a crushing blow for the young woman. She had been closeted with her mother for the better

part of the day, presumably commiserating and crying out her frustrations, joined by her mother no doubt, considering Mrs. Weasley had wanted the match for as long, or longer, than her daughter had.

The Ginny who entered the room still had a hint of red around her eyes, evidence of the amount of mourning she had done for the loss of all her dreams. Still, as Hermione looked closer, she saw something she had not expected—a small inkling of hope. Although Hermione could not claim to be an expert on wizarding customs and laws, she did not know how Ginny could still hold out hope. The betrothal was a legal one, sealed by the magical power of the two families, therefore completely binding and unbreakable.

"Hi, Hermione," Ginny said, her manner nervous and uncertain.

Hermione smiled and returned to the open book on her lap—the book which she had opened over an hour earlier, but of which she had, as yet, not even read a single page. She was uncertain what she could do to help the young woman. Ginny's feelings, after all, were uncomfortably close to Hermione's, although unlike Ginny's, hers new and still somewhat raw.

"Crazy day, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but a good day, nonetheless," was the response.

The room was silent for several moments until Hermione glanced up and saw tears glistening in the corners of Ginny's eyes.

"Yes, a red letter day," the redhead spat bitterly.

"Harry's free," Hermione responded pointedly. "Would you have preferred the Ministry had snapped his wand?"

Flopping down on her bed, Ginny sank down onto her back, spreading her arms out wide and allowing an explosive sigh to pass through her lips. "That's not what I mean, Hermione. I'm... I'm happy Harry was freed, but..."

She was trying to be patient, but dealing with Ginny's fatalism and hopeless infatuation with Hermione's best friend was the last thing she wanted to think about. With her own thoughts and feelings as

unsettled as they were, Hermione would have preferred a quiet, solitary room to herself to think and deal with everything which had happened. Not for the first time, she wondered why she was not in her own room—the house certainly had enough to provide everyone with their own privacy.

"Of course, you don't care, do you?" Ginny spat bitterly when the silence had become oppressive. "You have never looked at him as anything other than a friend."

Hermione was just able to check her reaction to Ginny's statement, knowing in her own mind exactly how untrue it was. Still, she felt somewhat ashamed of her thoughts about the young girl—this was a shock for her, and Hermione knew she had not exactly been supportive.

"No, Ginny, I certainly don't know how you feel," Hermione replied, hearing the lie in her own voice but denying it all the same—her friend did not need to know of Hermione's feelings. "But Ginny, you knew there was no guarantee he would ever return your feelings. You've set yourself up for this by refusing to get over this obsession."

Abruptly sitting up, Ginny glared at Hermione, tears glistening on her cheeks and an expression of utter desolation etched upon her face. "I know," she responded quietly. "But as long as he was unattached, there was always a chance... I could still hope..."

Reaching across, Hermione took one of Ginny's hands and squeezed it in a friendly, commiserating gesture. "I understand. It's got to be hard, Ginny, but you need to let it go. Maybe now you can just be his friend without this infatuation getting in the way."

"I tell myself that," Ginny responded, lowering her head, "but I can't help but hope..."

"What is there left to hope for?" Hermione said, confused again over this hope to which Ginny continued to cling. "Harry's betrothed now, Ginny—a magical betrothal. As I understand it, there's nothing you or I or anyone else can do to break it."

The little redhead glanced up with a faint smile on her face which was incongruous with the tears which continued to sparkle on her

cheeks. "Actually, there is a way to break it, but that takes the agreement of both heads of the houses, which I doubt they would ever do—politically, this betrothal is far too important for Harry, the Delacours, and potentially our entire world. This could bring the French into the fight against You-Know-Who, which we badly need with Fudge at the controls."

This was a condition of which Hermione had not been aware, but she still failed to understand how Ginny could still hold out hope to be with Harry when there was little to no chance he would ever be free of the contract.

"You mean I finally knew something the great Hermione Granger didn't?" Ginny exclaimed with a small giggle.

A mock glare met her declaration, which only caused the girl to descend further into her mirth. Hermione would have been happy that the girl was able to laugh, if she had not detected a hint of hysteria in her voice.

"I imagine there are many things about the magical world and Pureblood traditions I don't know," Hermione responded, mock sternly. "That doesn't explain why you still hope to be with Harry even though he's essentially engaged."

The laughter stopped and a pensive look stole over Ginny's face. "I guess you wouldn't know this either... You know the magical world is somewhat... behind the Muggle world, as far as traditions go..."

At Hermione's impatient nod, she continued, "Well, in the magical world, there are no laws that state a man can only have one wife..."

A shocked Hermione stared back at her friend, her mouth open and working soundlessly.

"It's more like the lack of a law, actually. Although multiple marriages are not exactly common, they do still happen on occasion, especially among old Pureblood families which are in danger of dying out. The thought is that by having multiple wives, a man can father more children, expanding the blood line and preventing the possibility of only having one child and risking the line dying out."

Hermione was aghast, although a part of her was curious. "Really?"



Nodding her head, Ginny chuckled at Hermione's reaction. "Apparently, your reaction is very common among Muggle borns. For some families, such as the Zabini's, the problem is not serious—Blaise has several uncles, great-uncles, etc, all who have families of their own, making it unlikely Blaise will ever be involved in a multiple marriage. However, the Malfoys, although they may still have some relatives in France, do not have that luxury. Draco is the last scion of the Malfoy family in England, making him a prime candidate for eventually having more than one wife."

"As is Harry," Hermione breathed, understanding what her friend was saying.

Ginny nodded vigorously. "Yes. The Potters were a larger family at one time and are related to several other families if you go back far enough—the Longbottoms and my own family, for example. If he had been brought up by his parents, Harry would have been taught by his parents that he may one day be a part of a multiple marriage. In fact, if he had lived, James might have eventually had more than one wife, as he had no siblings either."

"Not if what I have heard of Lily was true," Hermione murmured, feeling certain the headstrong witch would never have put up with another wife for her husband.

Giggling again, Ginny nodded her head. "You're likely right. The first wife has to agree to the second marriage, so Lily could have vetoed any subsequent marriages."

"What if there are multiple marriage contracts?" Hermione asked.

"Then the first one has precedence, and any subsequent ones must be ratified by the first wife before they can become active. However, that would never happen, as the father would have to negotiate both. Why would he create two when there is no guarantee the first wife would agree to the second contract?"

"For the political connections?"

"Possible, but there still is no guarantee. And negotiating such a contract would have inherent risks—the second family might be

offended by their contract being cancelled, especially if they were not notified of the first contract's existence. It hardly ever happens."

As she thought about it, Hermione wondered if Ginny was thinking this through properly. It certainly seemed as though there was a possibility there, but there were so many variables.

"I was not aware of this," she said, speaking slowly and carefully. "But there are so many unknown factors, Ginny. Harry may not feel that way about you, and I'm sure his fiancée will not appreciate you dating him in order to try to become his second wife."

"I know," Ginny responded, her features once again assuming the desolate look they had had when she had first entered the room.

"So why do you continue to hope?" Hermione asked her, trying to remain as kind and understanding as she could. "And besides, are you certain you want to share your husband?"

"If you really loved someone and the only way to be with them was to share, wouldn't you?" Ginny challenged.

"I'm... not certain I could," Hermione responded, confused as to her own feelings. Would she be willing to share Harry with Fleur, a woman she did not even really know? It would be one thing with someone like Ginny who she knew and liked, but to do so with a near stranger would be... difficult. Even if she could manage to reconcile herself to the idea in the first place...

"Ginny, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not certain you love Harry."

When the young girl began to protest, Hermione stopped her with an open hand. "Ginny, you don't even know Harry—you've been too shy to get to know him. How can you say you love him?"

For the first time since she had known the young girl, Hermione's statement seemed to give the girl pause where Harry was concerned. She did not know if Ginny was truly in love with Harry or just infatuated, but she felt it would be better for the girl to let this go—it was almost certain to cause her less heartache in the long run.

"I don't know," Ginny finally stated in a small voice. "I've had this attraction to him for so long... And yet, I guess I really don't know him, do I? I just know the Boy-Who-Lived."

"That can always be fixed," Hermione said with a smile.

At Ginny's raised eyebrow, Hermione continued, "Be his friend, Ginny. Harry doesn't need another fan girl or a potential second wife right now—there will be time enough for that later. What he needs now are friends. You need to let go of your infatuation and get to know Harry as he is, not as you've pictured him all your life. Believe me, treating him as a friend is the best way for you to catch his eye."

The thoughtful look which entered Ginny's eye caused a sigh of relief to the young witch—it appeared she was finally getting through to the younger girl.

"And one other thing, Ginny... I would recommend you give up on your hope—there are too many obstacles to be overcome. If some time down the road it does happen, it will be pleasantly surprising for you, but you're setting yourself to be crushed if it doesn't. Let it go."

The clouded over eyes told Hermione all she needed to know about Ginny's reaction to her second piece of advice, but the girl smiled tremulously after a few moments and nodded bravely. It perhaps was not the best she could have hoped, but as long as the other girl had held on to her fantasy, giving it up would undoubtedly be difficult.

Hermione lay back down on her bed and stared up at the ceiling. Now if she could only let it go herself...

"I know this is sudden and not what you wished for, ma chérie, but you know how I worry for you. It could be much worse, could it not?"

As the light of the afternoon gave way to the lengthening shadows of early evening, Fleur Delacour sat on the window seat in her bedchamber, peering out at the beautiful landscapes of the hills and valleys which comprised her home, the words of her father echoing through her mind. For once, the scene in front of her, the mass of verdant green trees and narrow streams amidst the rugged hills of her home, was not enough to distract her from her thoughts and worries.

A small sigh escaped her lips and she pressed her forehead against the window, lost in thought. As every other young girl in the wizarding world, she had been well aware of the fact that her father could negotiate a marriage contract for her, although he had promised her he would only do it if he felt it was in her best interests and the best interests of the family. And of course like any other girl, she had dreamed of a wonderful man sweeping her off her feet, carrying her away to life of love and laughter. Still, as her father said, it was not truly a bad situation. And though she was unsettled over the situation, thinking back on the conversation with her father did bring her some comfort...

Fleur sat down heavily on the chair in front of the desk in her father's study, unable to believe what her father had just told her.

"Marriage contract?" she breathed. "I was not aware there was a marriage contract in existence for me."

"I found out about it just recently myself," her father responded with a kindly smile. "I did not wish to worry you, so I did not say anything about it until I was certain we would be agreeing to it."

Not knowing what to say, Fleur sat quietly in her chair, staring at the wood of her father's desk. Having reached the age of eighteen, she had assumed that as she had not yet been entered into a marriage contract, it was not likely to happen. Erroneously assumed, it appeared. She was well aware of the state of her father's position in both the political landscape of France and the wizarding world as a whole, and try as she might, she could not imagine with whom he would need to cement a political alliance.

But suddenly, the import of the words made its way through her consciousness and she peered up at her father. "You didn't know about it? Then who negotiated it if you did not?"

"It was negotiated fifty years ago for my generation," her father replied. He then proceeded to relate the history of the marriage contract by which she was now bound. But the one thing he did not tell her was the identity of her betrothed.

"I see you are curious of the identity of the young man," he finally said after he had related the entirety of it to her.

"On the contrary," she said with a hint of wry humor which she did not feel, "that is the kind of minor detail which is quite unimportant, given the circumstances."

Her father favored her with an indulgent smile. "That is the spirit, Fleur—and I think you will not be displeased with the young man I have chosen for you."

Fleur glared at her father, somewhat put out that he would not come to the point and tell her to whom she had been saddled.

With another smile of amusement, her father finally relented. "Your new betrothed is Harry Potter."

A stunned Fleur stared back at her father, aghast at the revelation. Never would she have believed that her father would betroth her to not only a foreign wizard but one of the most famous in the wizarding world. Harry Potter!

"Fleur?"

"But Papa, I hardly know him."

"You have met him, yes?" At Fleur's nod, he continued. "I have never met him personally, but from what little I saw at that tournament, he seemed like a serious, competent young man, and he handled himself amazingly well given the circumstances. His godfather, although I suppose he can be considered to be somewhat biased in his opinion, has nothing but good to say about the young man."

Fleur considered all her father had said, certain he believed he was doing as he felt was right. Knowing what she did of Harry, Fleur could not help but agree with her father's assessment. There were certainly worse wizards out there to whom she could be bound, not that Jean-Sebastian Delacour would ever tie her to someone merely for political gain—he loved his daughters too much for that.

"I know this is sudden and not what you wished for, ma chérie, but you know how I worry for you. It could be much worse, could it not?"

And she was aware of what it could be. As a Veela, she knew that many men would seek her out for her beauty and the status of being with a Veela. The burden of distinguishing those interested in Fleur the person from those interested in the Veela was always difficult and uncertain. Surely, from what she knew of Harry Potter, he was not the type who would use her in such a way.

"Yes, father," she whispered, "it could be worse."

"I know. That is one of the reasons why I decided to enter into this agreement. I trust the account of your young man that I have been given, and I believe that he will treat you well. By all accounts, Harry hates his fame and wishes for a normal life, something which I hope you both can build together. In fact, it seems to me that you two share a similar problem: you cannot be certain if a man is attracted to you or the Veela in you, and Mr. Potter cannot be certain if a woman is attracted to him or his fame.

"Besides, given what I have been told of him, I think you will do very well together. At the very least, it is much more than many Purebloods have to look forward to when entering into an arranged marriage."

Fleur flushed and smiled at her father. "I understand, papa, and I appreciate the fact that you look out for Gabrielle and I so well."

"I have only ever wanted for you and your sister to be happy, Fleur," Mr. Delacour said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his desk while fixing his daughter with a serious look. "All I ask is that you keep an open mind about your betrothed and give him a chance. I think you will be pleasantly surprised."

Although still somewhat shocked and uncertain about the situation, Fleur nevertheless agreed that at this point it was the only thing she could do. Besides, after she had gotten over her initial impression of Harry, she had been intrigued by his heroism and bravery.

"I shall give him every chance, papa," Fleur agreed.

She was still unsettled two days after the conversation with her father. She had undergone several opinion shifts since she had met the young man—from the irritation and condescension she had felt toward the young man when he had unexpectedly entered the

anteroom after the goblet incident, to the respect she had grudgingly felt when he had out flown his dragon, to the grateful admiration she had felt when he had appeared from the waters of the lake... Fleur's emotions toward the young man had been in a state of constant flux from the time she had met him.

And now she was all but engaged to him. It was unsettling.

Yet she knew her father was right about Harry—he was not happy with his fame and wanted nothing more than to leave it behind. The young man who had saved her sister and helped her in the maze when he had every reason to ignore her in pursuit of the prize would never mistreat her or hold her up as a trophy.

The other part of her changing circumstances was the prospect of her spending her last year of schooling at Hogwarts, leaving the familiar halls of Beauxbatons and entering the hallowed halls of the oldest school in Europe as a student rather than a visitor. She was ambivalent about that thought—on the one hand, she was leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar, while on the other she really was not leaving much. She had a few friends at Beauxbatons, and none of them were particularly close—a result of her status, unfortunately. In some ways, Hogwarts might even be better, as there she would potentially have at least the friendship and support of her betrothed. Yes, it was certainly better to look forward to the future and hope for the best rather than mope at her sudden change in status.

A small pop startled her from her musings. Looking away from the window, she saw the small creature that had joined her in the room.

"Mistress Fleur, the master comes with his guest. You is being wanted in the drawing room."

Fleur smiled at the house-elf. "I will be right there. Thank you, Kappy."

The elf grinned and then popped away, leaving Fleur to look at herself one last time in the mirror before making her way from the room. It was time to meet with her betrothed.

## Chapter 5 – Chateau Delacour

The journey back to Grimmauld, and subsequently through the Floo connection to the Ministry and ultimately to France, was uneventful, a fact for which Harry was extremely grateful. Due to the lateness of the hour, the Ministry building had been far less populated than it had earlier in the day, meaning that although the few people who were still there would stop and stare at Harry as he passed, he was free from the scrutiny of scores of curious magicals all at once.

J.S., after seeing Harry's arrival in the Ministry building in a heap on the floor, had taken him in hand, showing him the proper way to exit a Floo—the trick was to keep moving. Harry's mistake had been to stop, for he had not realized the transportation magic assumed that a person entered the connection moving and would end it moving—his momentum had always caused him to pitch forward onto his face whenever he exited. Simply walking into the Floo and continuing to walk should be enough to keep a magical on his feet. Wondering why no one had ever seen fit to share this pearl of information with him, Harry was nevertheless eager to put his new knowledge to the test. His first attempt through the international Floo was somewhat successful—he did stumble, but he was able to maintain his balance and not fall, a huge accomplishment for the young man.

The French Ministry building was as quiet as the British one had been, but the difference between the two was palpable. Whereas he was an object of curiosity in his homeland, here, people continued on their business without a second glance. Those few who did recognize him—and from their reactions, he could tell who did—merely looked at him curiously, perhaps wondering why he was in France, before continuing on their way. Likely, word of what had happened in the Wizengamot courtroom that morning had not made its way to the general populace of France. For now, Harry reveled in the anonymity—there would undoubtedly be a time later when he would become an object of much more scrutiny in this country, as well, due to J.S. and the marriage contract.

The French Ministry was a whirlwind tour for Harry. J.S. took him to the main administrative offices of the building, introducing him to some of his acquaintances who were still in the building, before taking him to the Minister's office and introducing him to the French Minister.



The French Minister was a short and balding man, heavyset, but with a jovial smile and a welcoming attitude—Harry liked him immediately, not only for the welcome he received, but also for the sense he received of the man. Although this man was friendly and outgoing, Harry sensed that he was not another Fudge—his questions and observations were keen and to the point, yet not intrusive.

Their conversation was short and mainly consisted of pleasantries and the Minister's personal welcome to France, after which Harry and J.S. made their way to the main Floo connections of the building and used the Floo Network to go to Chateau Delacour.

Stepping into the fireplace, Harry found himself in a large entry hall in an old stone building. It was largely unfurnished, decorated only with a few chairs along the walls and a large area carpet spread out in front of the fireplace through which he had just arrived. Halfway along the walls at right angles to the wall with the fireplace stood two opposing doors—the one on the left was massive, and he suspected it led to the outside of the castle, while the other was a large double door which, standing open, swung outward toward the entry hall. In all, the fireplace looked incongruous in the long entry hall, and he wondered if it had been built after the fact.

Seeing his expression, J.S. smiled at the young man, his words making it appear as though he had guessed the contents of Harry's thoughts.

"Looks a little odd, does it not?"

"I don't think castle builders were in the habit of putting fireplaces in entry halls."

J.S. laughed. "No, I don't suppose they were. One of my ancestors added it soon after we came into possession of the castle as a main Floo entry. I also have a private Floo in my study, but its existence is known only to a few, and it is heavily warded. Here, we can control who has access to the rest of the building, and the room is always watched by one of our house-elves."

As though on cue, a small pop was heard, and a house-elf stood gazing up at the two of them. He was dressed in a forest-green, one-piece pantsuit with gold stripes down the legs and along the

lapels and cuffs, and shiny black shoes on his feet. It looked very much to Harry like it was a uniform.

The elf bowed low. "Master Delacour, I is welcoming you home."

Harry stood there in surprise as the small elf spoke in much the same flawed English as his friend Dobby had spoken.

"Thank you, Matty. Can you please call Sirius down here to greet us?"

"Of course, master," the small elf replied. "I be taking young master's trunk up to young master's room." And then he disappeared with another small pop, taking Harry's belongings with him.

"Do you normally speak English here as well?" Harry asked with a glance at his guardian.

"We have always tried to ensure our girls spoke English as well as French, but ever since we found out about the tournament last summer, we have spoken English at home. The only way to learn how to speak in another language is to use it, after all."

Harry pondered that for several moments, thinking his words made sense, but still not understanding about the house-elf. "But what about the house-elves? Matty sounded just like..."

"Just like your house-elves in England?"

At Harry's confused nod, J.S. chuckled and led him through the double doors into the castle. "One facet of house-elf magic is that it allows them to speak in whatever language their master requires, though I assure you their grammar is no better in French than it is in English. For some reason, they always speak in this manner, regardless of what language it is."

It sounded like something which would catch Hermione's interest, but Harry did not pursue the subject—it was enough to know the house-elves would be able to speak with him.

At that moment, Sirius came rushing down a large set of stairs, and upon seeing Harry, his face broke out into a huge grin. He ambled

over and engulfed his godson in a huge hug, which Harry returned fiercely, the beginnings of tears forming in his eyes.

Overall, Sirius looked somewhat better than when Harry had seen him the last time more than three days earlier. Although he was still gaunt and thin, he had a twinkling in his eyes which Harry had never seen before, and his coloring was markedly better.

"It's good to see you, Sirius," Harry said, his voice choking with emotion. "I wondered where you went, but no one would tell me."

"I'm glad you're here, pup," Sirius responded. "No one was told where I was going—we had to keep this under wraps."

"Indeed," J.S. interjected. The corners of his mouth were turned up in a slight smile as he regarded the two wizards fondly. "I had Sirius brought here a few days ago, not only to get him out of England, but also to get him some treatment for the years he spent in Azkaban and on the run. We had to do it in secrecy, of course."

"Thank you," Harry said with some feeling. "I was hoping Sirius would get some help, but I didn't know what to do."

"You are very welcome— I think I've become quite attached to you all. And then, there is certainly some benefit in this arrangement for us all, not to mention the danger we are all in from your Voldemort. But that is a topic for another day. I assume you would like to do come catching up?"

Harry glanced at Sirius and—catching the smirk on his face—grinned in response.

"Well then, I think you could use my office for a private conversation," J.S. continued, apparently not requiring an answer. "I'll have Matty call you for dinner—it should be served in about another hour."

With a companionable hand on each of his companions' shoulders, J.S. walked away, leaving the two to their privacy.

They walked the halls in silence until they came to an ornate door which opened into a large comfortable study with a large wooden desk and several comfortable chairs. The walls held several

bookcases along with several tapestries and wizard photos of the Delacour family. On the far wall away from the desk stood the other fireplace of which J.S. spoke; it was lit with a cheery, yet small, fire. It was roomy and welcoming and spoke of a level of comfort which Harry had not experienced frequently in a home setting.

Sirius directed Harry to two chairs situated in front of the fireplace, and they sat down, neither one commenting for the moment, both content in being again with the other. Although he had only known Sirius for a little over a year and had yet to spend much time in his company, Harry was amazed at how comfortable he felt with the older wizard—they had a natural connection between them, one which Harry felt transcended the bond between them due to Harry being James' son.

"So, I suppose you have some questions for me," Sirius broke the silence.

He supposed correctly—yet Harry hardly knew where to start. This day had been so sudden that he had not had time to come to terms with what had happened. It would take some time before he had it all sorted out in his mind.

"You're getting treatment?"

"The best healers in France," Sirius said with a laugh. "Although I don't know I'll ever be truly free of the specter of Azkaban, I feel better now than I have in years."

"I'm happy," Harry responded quietly. "I had wondered where you went. It seemed a little unfair that Ron and Hermione got to spend more time with my own godfather than I did."

"I understand, Harry—I'd love to spend more time with you. Unfortunately, it will have to wait until next summer. You'll be going to England with the Delacours next week, while I will have to stay in France and continue my treatment."

"I guess..." Harry said, somewhat despondent that his godfather would be taken away from him again.

"It will be all right. You will be back for Christmas and Easter breaks, and I'll make sure to be here so we can spend time together."

Somewhat mollified, Harry fixed his godfather with questioning look. "So, how did you get to France? I imagine you couldn't just walk through the international Floo."

"No, there you would be correct," Sirius said with a laugh. "Actually, Moony brought me here. Most wizards are so arrogant in their belief in the superiority of magic that they completely discount Muggles. Moony has spent considerable time in the Muggle world due to his difficulty in finding work in the wizarding world—it has to do with his furry little problem, you see.

"He purchased a rail ticket through the chunnel to France, and I went with him in my dog form. Once here, it was a simple matter to make our way to the Ministry building, where I was formally granted asylum."

Such a simple yet effective plan, Harry mused. Not only would the local authorities have no way to detect him in his Animagus form, but the magical world would have no way of knowing he was using Muggle transportation—most magicals used magical transportation, with the notable exception of the Hogwarts Express.

"And the marriage contract? Care to explain to me how it came about?"

Laughing, Sirius slapped Harry on the shoulder. "I had imagined you would like to hear about that."

The story was short, but Sirius did his best to explain the circumstances. And although Harry was still somewhat ambivalent about the whole thing, the situation made sense from Sirius' point of view. He even understood why they accelerated their plans after the incident with Dementors in Little Whinging.

When Sirius fell silent, Harry thought for several moments before making any comments.

"So, you did this for my benefit?"

"Yes, Harry," Sirius responded, looking somewhat embarrassed to Harry's eyes. "The marriage contract seemed like a godsend when I found it—by then it was much too late to get you out of the

tournament, but knowing Voldemort had been after you for some time, I felt it was the best way to ensure your safety and cement some alliances."

"But wasn't there some other way?" Harry complained. "I mean, I know you did your best and all, but now I've got to marry someone I hardly know..."

A mischievous expression came over Sirius' face. "Come on, Harry, I don't think it will be that much of a sacrifice. After all, if the rumors are anything to go by, the lady is not too repulsive.

Harry snorted. "More like bloody stunning, if you ask me! But that's not the point."

"I know it isn't. But you have to consider the advantages, Harry. With this contract, you are forging an important political alliance which will only help with your insane dark lord problem. The French can be very helpful in the coming war, and you can't discount the value of friends who love you and want to protect you."

"I know, Sirius," Harry replied with a sigh. "It's just... it seems like my whole life has been decided for me... I've never made any decisions on my own. This is just another example of someone deciding something important for me without my input."

Sirius' almost playful expression sobered immediately, and he stared at Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I just... I was desperate to help you. I felt so useless sitting there in Grimmauld while you were in danger. I truly believe this is a very big step for you. It is in your best interest, Harry."

"I believe you," Harry responded, his voice almost inaudible. "Look, I'm... grateful you care, Sirius. Merlin knows that's been in short supply in my life. But don't expect me to be... ecstatic about this betrothal—it's too much, too soon. I need some time to think about it... to figure out how I feel about all this."

"I would not have expected anything else. Just promise me one thing—don't shut Fleur out. She is a wonderful young woman, and if I'm any judge of character, I think you will get along famously with her. Get to know her, Harry."

"I will, Sirius," Harry affirmed. "She's in the same boat as I am—I certainly wouldn't hold this against her."

"Great!" Sirius said, slapping Harry on the back. "That's all I can ask for. I think it's almost time for dinner—would you like to see your room first?"

When Harry replied he would, Matty was called and the two of them separated—Harry to go to his bedroom, and Sirius started to pour himself a drink. Harry suspected he was now feeling guilty over his actions regarding the betrothal, and although Harry did not want to accuse Sirius of anything or make him feel the guilt, he wanted his feelings to be known. He would talk to Sirius later that night and tell him.

A quick walk through the castle, and they had arrived at the family apartments, Matty chattering away at his side, telling him about how the family had been excited about his arrival and how it was an honor for him to be housed in the family wing rather than the guest wing. Harry smiled indulgently at the loquacious little fellow, reflecting that he reminded him of Dobby—not as hyper, but certainly eager to please and talkative.

The room was several times larger than the small room at Privet Drive which the Dursleys had allowed him to inhabit. It was dominated by a large four poster bed, while a large fireplace stood on the opposite wall. No Floo access, though, thought Harry, nor could he expect to find many of things which had been present in his aunt and uncle's home. It was a castle, after all, and the home of a wizarding family, which meant the normal necessities of a Muggle house, such as electricity and central heating, would not be present.

The light switch on the wall and the large dome light above his head disproved that fact, and as he flicked it on, light flooded into the room. Wondering why they had lights, Harry set out to search the room for any other Muggle items, but he was unable to find anything else. It was another question to ask the Delacours.

Other than the bed, the furnishings in the room consisted of a desk against the far wall beside the window and two comfortable looking stuffed armchairs situated in front of the fire. His trunk lay on a chest at the end of the bed, although it had not yet been unpacked. Harry pondered doing some unpacking for a moment before deciding not

to bother—J.S. had said they were moving into the ambassador's manor in England very shortly, after all, so his stay here would likely be very short in nature.

Lying down on the bed, Harry spread his hands and legs out wide, luxuriating in the softness of the mattress and the overall comfort of the suite, something of which he had not known much of in the past. His bedroom on Privet Drive certainly could not compare, and although his bed at Hogwarts was very comfortable, still it was a dorm room, shared with four other young men. This was his own and far more than he had ever had before.

A moment later, Matty popped in, informing him that dinner would be served shortly and that he was to make his way down to the dining hall to greet the family. Suddenly nervous, Harry asked the small elf to lead him there, to which Matty replied that was the reason why he was here after all. Harry grinned and fell into step behind him.

Harry was led to a sitting room down several levels below his bedchamber. Upon entering, he was stunned by the sight of more beauty in one location than he ever could have imagined—the entire female population of the Delacour family was there. Fleur, of course, he already knew from the previous year, but the older woman who sat beside her could easily have been mistaken for her older sister, if Harry did not already know who she was. Fleur was a carbon copy of her mother, from her deep ice-blue eyes, to the waves of silvery blond hair which hung free down her back, to the pale skin, high cheekbones and slightly narrowed chin. When they stood to greet him, he could see that they were even of the same height with one another, with the mother perhaps slightly taller than the daughter.

Gabrielle, who he also knew, was contrasted slightly from the two older women by her hair, which was a lighter shade—a pale, almost white, blond which shimmered in the late afternoon sun. Her eyes were also a darker shade of blue, and her face was heart-shaped, although with age and the loss of her baby fat, that might well change. Still, her whole person bespoke of the ethereal beauty of her older family members, of which she would undoubtedly share when she matured. The truly disconcerting fact was that they were all watching him closely, making Harry feel like he was on display.

Feeling exceptionally self-conscious, Harry nevertheless squared his shoulders and, with resoluteness he was far from feeling, marched



into the room, only to be almost bowled over by a blond-haired blur who latched on to him like a heat-seeking missile. Gabrielle excitedly chanted his name while chattering away in French (of which Harry, of course, did not understand a word), all the while hugging him as though she would never let go.

Harry glanced up at the other two Delacour women, noting their fond smiles for their younger family member as well as the welcoming smiles for himself. Harry immediately blushed again, looking down at the still-prattling Gabrielle, not noticing the smile of appraisal which graced his future mother-in-law's face, or the slightly forced quality of Fleur's own smile.

"Gabrielle, Harry does not understand French, my sweet," Mrs. Delacour admonished, her voice a throaty soprano, contrasting with what he remembered of Fleur's clearer voice.

The young witch's hands flew to her mouth, and she giggled, batting her eyelashes at Harry, who, bemused at the sight, smiled back at her.

"Oh, excusez-moi, Harry," Gabrielle breathed. "I did not think; I was so happy to see you."

"It's all right, Gabrielle," Harry responded, unable to stifle a returning grin.

"Come with me—I shall introduce you to my mama."

She dragged him the rest of the way across the room and dropped into a girlish curtsy in front of her mother, making Harry wonder if he should bow to the Delacour matron.

"Mama, I would like you to meet Harry Potter, my savior, and Fleur's..." here she cast a dirty look at her elder sister, "...betrothed."

Ignoring her daughter's antics, Mrs. Delacour stepped forward with a silvery laugh and greeted Harry. "Welcome to Delacour Castle, Harry; we are happy to have you here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Delacour," Harry replied, feeling somewhat uncertain.

"Now, Harry," she admonished, "I know you call my husband by his name, and I would prefer you did the same with me. Please, call me Apolline. Now, I believe you are already acquainted with my older daughter, Fleur."

Harry smiled, suddenly feeling bashful, and turned to greet Fleur. She was regarding him with an unreadable expression on her face, and although he did not detect any hostility, he was still uncertain of her reception.

"Harry," she greeted him softly, prompting him to respond in kind. The situation seemed about to become somewhat awkward between the two of them until Gabrielle was once again there, tugging on his arm, once again began speaking, asking him how his trip was and how he liked France, among about a million other things.

Trying to decide how to respond, Harry was grateful when they were interrupted by the arrival of the two men.

"Ah, Harry, I see you have begun to charm my entire family," J.S. stated with a hint of laughter in his voice. "I can see I will have to watch you, or you'll be stealing them all away from me!"

"Don't tease the boy," Sirius cautioned with a smirk. "You'll break him. He is a teenager, after all."

The entire room broke out into laughter; even Harry laughed, although he did direct a pointed glare at the Marauder. Sirius did not deign to reply to his godson's displeasure, contenting himself with nothing more than a wink and an even larger grin.

"Well, if we are all finished, I think we can proceed to the dining room for dinner," Apolline interjected. She closed the remaining distance between Harry and herself and smiled brightly at him, interlocking one of his arms in hers. "Besides, Harry is such a handsome, charming young man—I think my husband could stand to take a few pointers from him."

She directed a mock arch look at her husband and then began sashaying from the room, pulling a completely nonplused Harry along with her. He could feel his cheeks burning in embarrassment,

but Apolline merely smiled at him and directed him into the dining room, making certain to seat him beside her. Over his shoulder, he could hear J.S.' good-natured grumbling, along with Sirius' open laughter, as each of the other men chose one of the sisters and escorted them into the room.

Whatever Harry had expected from the family, this was certainly not it, prompting him to wonder if he could manage to survive not only Sirius but also the entire Delacour family.

Dinner that evening was nothing like Harry had ever experienced at a dinner table—at least, nothing like any family he had ever eaten with; Hogwarts was another story altogether.

At the Dursleys', his residence for the first eleven years of his life and his summers since then, dinners had not been an occasion for much conversation. While Dudley and Vernon had typically spent every meal trying to stuff everything they could in their mouths, his Aunt Petunia had eating sparingly and daintily, almost as though trying to make up for the atrocious table manners and gluttony of her male family members. And to Harry, whose presence was merely tolerated at the best of times, actually speaking to any of his family members of inconsequential nothings was just as incomprehensible. His usual practice was to eat as quickly as possible and leave their presence—a circumstance which was undoubtedly as welcome to the Dursleys as it was to Harry himself.

By contrast, the other family with whom he had frequently dined—the Weasleys—had a tendency toward garrulity, as they were, as a family, quite boisterous and outgoing. Their mealtimes were generally filled with chatter, each family member loudly and confidently stating their opinions and generally having a good time. Yet while Harry generally enjoyed his time with the Weasleys, the raucous atmosphere, along with the way the family generally interacted with one another, left the quiet and shy young man slightly overwhelmed; in essence, they made him feel welcome by word and deed, but their family atmosphere was not one in which he could feel completely comfortable. He just was not certain he fit in.

Dinner with the Delacours was, by contrast, quiet and subdued. They quite clearly adored each other—the parents' pride and affection for their daughters, the children's respect and love for their parents, all of this was clear to see. Yet they were quiet and

controlled in their warmth, and their conversation was pleasant and loving, yet subdued and respectful. Each person was allowed to state their own opinion without interruption before the next person took up the conversation, something which contrasted heavily with the Weasleys' tendency to speak over one another in an effort to be heard. Harry did not think any less of the Weasleys for the way their family unit worked, but he found himself thankful for the Delacours' quiet camaraderie—it was certainly more suited to his own somewhat quiet and thoughtful demeanor.

The food was delicious—as good or better than anything he had eaten at the Weasley table or even Hogwarts, and Harry, as famished as he was due to the length of time which had passed since breakfast, was able to do a credible impression of Ron's legendary ability to pack away his food, much to the amusement of his hosts.

The conversation generally revolved around the events of the day, with the Sirius and the Delacour women literally hanging on every word of what had happened in the courtroom. Sirius, of course, had found the whole situation—especially Fudge's humiliation—amusing in the extreme, and he had complimented Harry and J.S. many times on the immense prank they had perpetrated on magical Britain.

Harry's questions also proved a major topic of conversation. Anything regarding the situation and the specifics of the marriage contract, and what was expected of them was deferred by tacit consent by each of the diners. Now was the time for dinner and pleasant conversation—such weighty discussion could wait for another time.

However, Harry did learn a few things of interest. First, when he asked about the lights in his room, J.S. chuckled and informed him that although the light switch and dome in his room gave the appearance of electricity, it was in reality a clever manipulation of magic paired with certain Muggle ideas. Unless heavily shielded, electricity and electronics were almost inoperable when a certain level of ambient magic was present, and of course, with the presence of the house-elves, Delacour far exceeded those limits. The lights in his room were actually a permanent charm which cast a Lumos spell in the dome of his room and which was controlled by the runes set into the switch and the dome where the Lumos spell was cast. Similarly, the temperature in each room, the water in the

taps and toilets, and a number of other ideas taken from Muggle devices could all be controlled by similar magical ingenuity.

Harry was astonished, not having seen its like before. When questioned, J.S. and Sirius led a new discussion of the lives of magicals in Britain and other lands, conversing about what the rich could afford in comparison to those of a more modest financial stature. Essentially, the gist of the conversation was that although such devices were certainly not prohibited in any way, for many of the poorer classes, it was prohibited due to the sheer cost they incurred. Thus, the Delacours, who were quite wealthy in their own right, were able to afford such luxuries, while the Weasleys, who were notorious for their limited means, could not.

When further questioned, Harry discovered that political leanings and prejudices also affected the presence of such devices in their homes. The Longbottoms, for example, were certainly able to afford the expense and would likely have such devices, due to their generally tolerant opinions, whereas the Malfoys, well known for hating anything Muggle, would undoubtedly stick to the old ways to light and heat their homes merely due to their distaste for admitting Muggles had any good ideas.

The diners themselves were a treat to converse with, each different in their own ways. Sirius was talkative, regaling the company with tales of his exploits with James and the other Marauders, while the older Delacours were friendly and kind (Mrs. Delacour doing her best to learn everything of her future son-in-law). Gabrielle was chatty and bold for a nine-year-old, as she attempted to monopolize Harry's attention for the entire meal, something which earned admonishments from her mother several times. By contrast, Fleur was quiet and composed, and although Harry felt her gaze resting on him several times, her expression was inscrutable and her contribution to the dinner conversation was sparing and vague. He was unable to determine whether she was displeased with the situation in which they now found themselves—by contrast, he could not determine that she was especially pleased with it either. It had Harry worried.

When dinner was finished, the adults, no doubt thinking it would be better for the two young people to become better acquainted with one another while they became used to their new situation, suggested they go off for a while together. Harry, though he was not

opposed to the idea, nevertheless glanced at Fleur, trying to see if she had any particular opposition for the plan. Seeing her nod in agreement, he signaled his own consent and followed her from the room.

She led him up several flights of stairs, down several hallways, and to a sitting room which he thought was near to the family bedrooms, though he was not certain due to his unfamiliarity to the layout of the castle.

They sat somewhat uncomfortably for several moments, neither knowing what could be said at such a time. To Harry, it almost seemed like he was stealing her future from her by means of the infernal contract—the fact that he had had nothing to do with its enactment was almost irrelevant.

"Too bad neither of us possesses my sister's ability to chatter."

Harry laughed at her comment, happy that his betrothed had found a way to break the stalemate.

"She appears rather determined," he said in response. "I don't remember her being that talkative at the tournament."

"She would have been if papa had allowed her to be. She's not always this way—you seem to have made a lifelong friend when you pulled her from that lake."

Harry groaned and leaned back on the couch. "I hope she gets over it—I get enough of that treatment as it is."

Fleur appeared to be amused by his reaction. "She will—she is only nine, after all."

They were silent for several moments, the lightness of the moment seemingly exhausted. Harry was not certain he was the greatest conversationalist, but he felt he had best try to contribute to their conversation—the tone of this time may greatly affect their future relationship.

He blurted the only thing he could think of: "This is a little awkward."

She smiled her agreement but said nothing further.

"So, I supposed you were surprised," he continued after another brief pause.

"Just a little," she agreed. "I always knew it was possible, but I didn't realize there was one in existence.

"I was certainly surprised it was you," she continued quietly after a slight pause.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, uncertain as to how accepting of the situation she was. "It seems my ability to attract trouble to my complicated life has pulled you in, too."

"Oh, Harry," she responded, reaching out a hand to touch his arm, "I was not meaning to complain or blame you. We weren't the ones who agreed to this contract, though we have to live with it..."

Her comments mollified Harry somewhat, but he still did not know how she felt about the situation. It appeared she was at the very least resigned, but certainly she was not exactly happy about it.

"How did you feel when you found out?"

Harry took a deep breath and tried to organize his scattered thoughts. "I'm not certain I've sorted out my feelings yet... I just found out about this at the trial this morning."

An aghast Fleur stared back at him. "Just found out this morning?" She did not appear happy with his disclosure. "You mean they told me two days ago to give me time to get used to it, and nobody thought to tell you before?"

"Sirius was already gone by that time," Harry protested. "I assume they wanted to make certain it was kept a secret..."

Fleur's eyes continued to flash with displeasure. "We'll see about that," she responded coldly. "No wonder you have not been able to come to terms with it."

Though he could see her point, Harry was not about to continue with this line of conversation—she was obviously displeased with her father and Sirius for not telling him in advance, but for Harry, having

been told the minimum all his life, this was nothing new. He had learned to take momentous changes with a certain amount of aplomb—it was either that or go completely insane.

"I was surprised," he stated, trying to return to the previous direction of their conversation. "I don't know that I've ever been so shocked as when your father made his announcement.

"Though I suppose I shouldn't have been," he continued in a slightly mischievous manner. "I've had so many things happen in my crazy life I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by anything any more. After tournaments, crazy dark lords, Dementors, and basilisks, a betrothal contract should be a run-of-the-mill occurrence!"

Her silvery laughter rang out through the room, prompting Harry to join in. The ability to laugh in the face of such life-changing and unsettling circumstances was one which brought him a certain amount of comfort.

Sobering, Harry sized up his still-chuckling companion. He had to admit that Sirius was right—he would have had to have been blind not to notice it for himself, but it was true that she was delicate and beautiful—stunning, even—and he was well aware that physical appearance would never be an issue in this relationship, at least from his side. Of course, he had always seen her from a bit of a distance in the past—figuratively and, at times, even literally. Now, from up close, looking on her as a betrothed and potential lover, he had to admit he could likely do no better from a physical standpoint. And, he had discovered in the past few moments, though he could certainly not claim to be intimately familiar with her, he was quickly coming to realize that her personality was equally as appealing as her physical attributes. Love had grown from less, he was certain.

"How do you feel about it?" Harry inquired, wanting to get directly to the point.

"I am not any more certain about my feelings than you are," Fleur responded, her manner hesitant. "I was surprised, and I am a little nervous, which is no less than what you feel, I think."

At Harry's nod of agreement, she continued. "I must tell you, though, that I was not disappointed or upset, just surprised. In fact, to a degree, I welcome this."



That definitely shocked Harry. "Really? Wouldn't you prefer to choose who you want to spend the rest of your life with?"

The penetrating gaze he received in response made him feel a little uncomfortable, but sensing his companion was not upset, he waited for her to reply.

"Do you know much of Veela, Harry?"

"The first I'd ever heard of Veela was at the Quidditch World Cup, Fleur. You're the first Veela I've ever met."

"You haven't had a magical upbringing, have you?"

When Harry confirmed her suspicion with a nod, she continued. "Harry, contrary to what you may have heard or read, Veela either are or are not. I am a Veela—I am not a 'quarter-Veela' or 'part-Veela' or anything of the sort. Veela always breed true—if a Veela gives birth to a girl, that girl is a Veela, and if she gives birth to a boy, then that boy is just a boy, although it could be said that that boy will likely be especially handsome. The Veela powers I possess are not any different from what my grandmother possessed."

"I didn't know that. Everyone talked about you being the granddaughter of a Veela."

Fleur shook her head in exasperation. "That is what I am talking about—it is a common misconception about Veela, which most people simply do not understand. It is true that my grandmother was the first Veela to marry into my mother's family line, but that is the extent of the truth about what is 'commonly known' about me.

"You should also know that Veela almost always give birth to girls and that Veela find it very difficult to become pregnant—most Veela give birth to only one child, and two is generally about the limit."

Harry was puzzled, uncertain of what this had to do with their present conversation. "So, we are likely to have only girls?" he queried.

"Yes, but that is not why I bring it up. I'm merely trying to point out that much is assumed or completely misunderstood about Veela. As for your question, I should explain in greater depth.

"Other things which you may have heard about Veela also have a grain of truth to them. I can, generally when I am angry, turn into a large bird-like creature and cast balls of fire, although I can control it to a degree. We are generally taught to control it as much as possible, as to Veela, losing oneself in one's emotions enough to undergo the transformation is considered to be a failing and one to be avoided assiduously. Because of this ability, I cannot become an animagus.

"Of course, you have heard about a Veela's looks—all Veela are hereditarily born with great beauty, which is passed down from our predecessors.

"The final thing which you may know about is the Veela allure. Tell me, Harry, have you ever seen the effects of the allure?"

"When I was at the World Cup," Harry began thoughtfully, "a group of Veela came out and danced in front of the crowd, causing most of the men to... to go a little crazy."

"Yes, that's it," Fleur confirmed, while looking at him with a speculative eye.

A little intimidated by her gaze, and guessing her thoughts, Harry became somewhat defensive. "I wasn't affected much by it. Not like Ron and his brothers. Hermione shook my shoulder, and I was fine."

A warm smile lit up her face. "I see my father was right about you," she murmured. "Harry, it takes great strength of mind to resist the allure of a Veela, and the fact that you were able to throw it off, especially when there were many Veela exerting their powers, is a testament to your strength of will and mind."

A blushing Harry ducked his head, embarrassed at the praise, but a quick look at Fleur merely showed her amusement.

"Do not be uncomfortable, Harry; there is no quality which is more highly sought after by Veela than the ability to resist the allure."

Harry simply nodded, not wishing to continue the conversation any further—it was just another example of his being different from everyone else when all he wanted was just to be normal.

"So, would it surprise you to learn that I have difficulty making friends?"

Though his first instinct was to gawk at her, other thoughts intruded, and the impact of what he had been told, both by Fleur and her father, brought him up short.

"I suppose the allure makes having friends difficult?" he ventured.

Fleur laughed. "A little. I'm impressed, Harry—most would not know what I am speaking of. All they see is my looks, and they automatically assume that I am the most popular girl in my school, when the opposite is true. Those who are not intimidated or outright jealous of my looks are afraid of my ability to steal their boyfriends by simply exerting myself. I have a tendency to have acquaintances rather than friends, and if any of those acquaintances begins a relationship with a boy, they tend to start avoiding me."

"And I suppose your beauty doesn't help in obtaining a boyfriend," Harry guessed. "I tend to have the same problem with my fame, although I'll admit I've never really tried to find a girlfriend."

"Exactly," Fleur said with a smile. "And I do not want a mindless, slobbering fool for a boyfriend... and believe me—I could have them by the dozen if I really wanted."

Harry snickered in response, certain she could.

"So, that is why the ability to resist the allure is such a prized commodity to Veela," she continued. "If I should ever be fortunate enough to have earned your love, I will know it is for me rather than the allure. And trust me—Veela have a tendency to... lose..."

Fleur blushed furiously and trailed off before visibly screwing up her courage and looking Harry in the eye. "What I mean to say is that Veela lose control of the allure when being... intimate... with a man—it tends to turn the man into a gibbering idiot. With your ability to resist the allure, I never need to worry about that, although it will help make our encounters much more... satisfying."

She breathed a sigh of relief and continued on in a calmer tone of voice. "And, given what I know about you, I will not have to worry about your using me for my looks. That is why, although this has been a shock and not entirely welcome, when I found out it was you, I knew that it could be much worse. I am willing to do whatever it takes to make sure our relationship works."

With those quiet words, Harry finally understood what the situation meant to her and how she viewed their future. It was humbling to know that she trusted him to the extent she did, and though he still did not feel like he knew her well, he was willing to ensure her future was everything she could ever hope it would be.

He smiled at her and reached across to give her a hug, an action which surprised her no more than it surprised himself—he normally was not one to initiate much body contact. Fleur, though, was pleased, if the beaming smile which adorned her face was anything to go by. It gave Harry a warm feeling inside to know he could be the means of making her happy.

"I understand, Fleur," he finally responded, trying to inject every bit of warmth he felt at that moment into his voice. "I think we have common goals and desires in a companion—I hope we can work it out between us."

"I am certain we can," she assured him. "We will have lots of time this year to work everything out—I am to attend Hogwarts for my last year of schooling."

Now Harry was confused. "Last year? I thought you were in seventh year during the tournament—you were seventeen, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I turned seventeen in October, so I was just within the rules. If you recall, all the Headmaster said was that contestants needed to be of age by the start of the tournament, and I was."

And Harry did see—after all, if they had been two years older, Hermione would have been eligible to enter the tournament due to the same circumstance.

"I understand," he responded with a smile. "I have a friend who was born in September, so although she's in the same year as I am, she is almost a full year older."

"That brown-haired witch that Krum rescued under the lake?"

"Yeah, that's her. Hermione is great—my best friend."

Fleur cocked her head to the side and peered at him with curiosity. "Then why was she not your hostage during the task? For that matter, if she is your best friend and you did not have a girlfriend, why did you not take her to the ball?"

"Hello? What do you see here? Male? Teenager? Clueless?"

His irreverent statement caught Fleur by surprise, and she descended into a fit of giggles while Harry grinned at her.

"I know I should have asked her, but I was too worried about being on display for all the school to see, not being able to dance, and I was afraid I would be rejected by anyone I asked."

Harry was silent for several moments, thinking about the events around the ball; knowing what he knew now about his relationship with his closest friend, he knew he had been a fool to have let the opportunity slip away. Not that it mattered now...

"I should have asked her," he repeated quietly.

"Hindsight is a wonderful thing, is it not?" said Fleur, breaking him out of his introspection.

"I suppose so," he replied with a sigh before visibly shaking himself out of his thoughts. This was his betrothed, and it would not do for her to see him pining over another woman.

"So, is there anything else you wanted to know about me?"

The twinkle in her eyes was reminiscent of a certain Headmaster. "Many things, I should imagine..."

They laughed together, and Harry was struck by the thought that just as the Delacour family had not been what he had expected, neither

was Fleur personally. Regardless of the way she had acted when he had originally met her, she was very friendly and personable now—Harry was becoming more accepting of the way things had turned out and was hopeful life with her would be all he had ever hoped for.

Upon spending some hours talking and laughing together, Fleur and Harry left the sitting room to rejoin her family, both still somewhat uncertain about the situation yet confident in the fact that they had begun to take steps to get to know one another.

They were greeted by the other family members, particularly by one young blond girl who had been sitting rather impatiently with the adults, eagerly awaiting Harry's return. His attention was immediately commandeered, and she led him over to a sofa and proceeded to chatter away at him, completely oblivious to the fond looks directed at her by the rest of the family.

Fleur was amused at her sister's antics, reflecting that from the time she had emerged from the lake and discovered the identity of her savior, the only subject which held any interest for her was Harry Potter. She appeared to have come down with a serious case of hero worship for the young man, and Fleur knew that although she was close as ever to her sister, Gabrielle was envious of the betrothal contract—Fleur was certain that if possible, Gabrielle would have traded places with her in an instant.

Knowing the benefits of the betrothal and having come to know Harry better by means of their conversation that evening, Fleur was beginning to feel better about the circumstance in which she found herself. She was by no means reconciled to it and was still somewhat anxious about what the future held for them, but she could see now why her father had acted the way he had, and she knew her chance for happiness was as good as any. She had put on a brave face for Harry—and suspected he had done the same for her—but hoped that everything would work out for the best.

The Delacour family, along with Sirius and Harry—who Fleur already knew were considered part of their extended family by her parents—discussed the upcoming week, noting that there was much to be done. First, her father brought up the fact that Harry had very few possessions—particularly clothes—and suggested the entire group go out on a shopping trip the next day to buy Harry some new things. Harry, of course, declined, stating that he had always done with little

and did not need new things. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he had been overruled by the female members of the family, whose ears perked up at the word "shopping", and Fleur's mother had immediately began sizing up Harry and planning his wardrobe, if Fleur knew her mother at all. Sirius and her father had merely smirked and gone along with the trip, teasing Harry to beware of females afflicted with "shopping disease". It had not taken much for her mother to quell their joking, merely a glare at Sirius along with an upraised eyebrow at her father which promised a long, unpleasant discussion later if he continued to bait the young boy.

When Harry grudgingly agreed to the excursion on the condition that he would be allowed to pay for his own clothes, her father had once again stepped in and told him that the Delacours were quite well off and that he could consider the new clothes a gift from his new family. His reaction to that had been rather surprising, as he had colored, disbelieving it and ultimately having to be convinced that his hosts were in earnest. Fleur had heard stories of his upbringing by what she was rapidly coming to think of as nasty Muggles, but she had not thought it to be as bad as it now appeared. She was left thinking that perhaps some day she would have to pay a visit to the reprehensible family and explain a few things to them...

Then they began discussing the impending move to the ambassador's manor in England, which, her father had informed the family, was to take place over the next several days. The house-elves would begin to move the family's belongings over to their new home the next day and would have it completed by Sunday at the latest. This would allow the family time to prepare and move at their leisure and perhaps even take Harry and Sirius to a few of the more famous sights in France. Needless to say, Harry was once again taken aback and embarrassed by the attention shown to him by his new family.

It was not until the talk turned to Harry's experiences that it really became interesting and Fleur began to truly understand exactly what life in the wizarding world had been like for the young man. And of course, it was her father who broached the subject.

"Harry," he stated into a lull in the conversation, "I would like to ask you about the return of this dark lord and the things I have heard about you over the past few years."

Harry shyly ducked his head, mumbling about how he had not really done anything special.

But her father was not amused. "Really, Harry, there is no need to be overly modest or ashamed of your successes. You have had a remarkable life thus far, and you should be proud of all that you have accomplished—do not be afraid to take credit for the things you have done well."

Fleur watched her betrothed very carefully, wondering how he would react to her father's admonition. He was a very modest young man, to be certain, but beyond that, Fleur was certain that his upbringing was a major contributor to his self-effacing attitude and inability to take praise. Her father was right—the ability to be proud of one's accomplishments without being overly arrogant was an important life skill, and Harry's inability to see any good in his experiences bespoke a disturbing lack of confidence, especially if, as rumored, he was to be at the forefront of the struggle against the dark lord.

At length, Harry gave a tentative smile back at his new guardian. "I will try, J.S."

"Good. Now, please tell us about your adventures, and there will be no holding back."

The next two hours were incredible in the description of the sheer number of dangerous escapades in which Harry Potter had been embroiled throughout the course of his first four years at Hogwarts. The family listened as he described his experiences with the Philosopher's Stone in his first year, shuddered in stunned disbelief when he told them about fighting the huge basilisk, and were awed by the story of the rescue of Sirius and the pure power of Harry's Patronus which had driven off dozens of the foul Dementors. And although Fleur herself had lived through much of his fourth year herself—bar the duel in the cemetery, of course—hearing Harry detail the events from his own perspective brought Fleur new understanding, giving her an even greater respect for the young man. He had truly undergone an incredible amount of challenges in his short life, and with the dark lord's unhealthy interest in him, Fleur felt certain it was only a matter of time until his next escapade. Her future with him, at least in the short term, would be anything but boring.



"That is a truly remarkable story, Harry," J.S. said at length, once Harry had finished his narration. "I do not know that I have ever heard of such heroism in an adult, let alone a teen such as yourself."

Harry blushed in response but had the presence of mind to murmur a quiet thank you to his host. "I had the help of my friends."

"I am sure you did, Harry, but you were obviously the catalyst for these events as well as the main participant. There are a few things I would like to clarify, though."

At Harry's nod, he continued. "In your second year, you say you fought a basilisk under the castle. Just how large was this basilisk?"

"I was a little too busy to take measurements," Harry responded cheekily.

Sirius let out a guffaw among the Delacours' laughter and slapped his godson on the back. "Spoken like a true Marauder!"

When the laughter had died down, her father said nothing—he just raised his eyebrow at Harry and waited for him to continue.

"My guess would be about fifty to sixty feet," Harry finally responded after a moment's thought. "At the end, I was standing about twenty feet up on Slytherin's statue when the basilisk reared up and faced me, and I'm guessing that as much or more of it was still on the ground."

A stunned silence met Harry's declaration. Fleur did not know much about basilisks—they were incredibly rare and illegal to breed, after all—but she did know that the bigger they became, the older and more deadly they were. One over fifty feet long would have to have been several centuries old. It was obvious, though, that Harry himself did not know anything of them beyond that which he had experienced first hand—that was probably enough for him. It would be enough for anyone.

Sirius whistled in awe. "I knew it had been a nasty piece of work there, Pup, but I didn't know the full extent. You really don't know what you have done, do you?"

At Harry's blank look, her father took up the discussion. "Harry, not much is known about basilisks beyond the obvious and their abilities. They are illegal to breed, and as the circumstances of their birth are specific, it is almost impossible for one to have been born naturally. You are aware of how they are bred?"

"Hermione researched in second year," Harry confirmed.

"Of course. Then you must realize that in order for a basilisk to exist, they almost had to have been created specifically by one with the knowledge, the will, and the use to do so. They are truly foul creatures and are illegal to breed—it is one of the tenets agreed to by all member states of the ICW. Therefore, the fact that you not only killed a basilisk but also one of that size underneath the castle is astonishing."

"Not only that, but you did it as a twelve-year-old, without any training," Sirius added. "I don't doubt there are few fully trained adults who could accomplish such a feat."

When Harry was about to protest, Sirius waved him off. "I know, Harry—you had help, and without the Headmaster's trusty phoenix, you would likely not be here to talk about it today. But it still is a marvelous feat, whether you did it yourself or not."

"And that brings us to another point," J.S. interjected. "Given the dark lord's interest in you, I think it is high time you receive some training to combat him. Has Dumbledore provided any additional training for you?"

Harry shook his head no.

"I am not surprised," J.S. responded, stroking his chin absently. "You are still young and just coming into the age of being able to handle some of the more powerful spells."

"Don't forget the fact that he mastered the Patronus in his third year," Sirius interrupted.

"Indeed. Maybe you have been there for a while. But the point is that it is generally about fifteen when a young person's magical core is deemed stable and powerful enough to handle truly powerful curses and hexes, and you will start learning them during this school year."

Still, I think we need to accelerate your learning so you can be ready for Voldemort the next time he comes after you—you may not be able to defeat him yet, but knowing some spells and having some dueling skills may just be enough to keep you alive until you can escape.

"I think we will bring someone in to tutor you for the rest of the summer, and Fleur can join you in your sessions."

Harry glanced over at Fleur with a questioning look in his eyes.

"It would certainly help, Harry," she told him. "The dark lord has shown many times that he takes a specific interest in you, and I would feel much better if my betrothed knew how to defend himself."

The shy smile on Harry's face completely disarmed Fleur, and she responded with one of her own. At this moment, she felt better about the whole situation—sitting with Harry and her family, listening to him talk about his adventures, all in his modest and self-effacing manner, had given her further insight into his character. She had to admit that she was impressed with what she had seen.

"Thank you, J.S. I would be happy to receive the additional training," Harry finally responded. "But could I invite my friends to attend, too?"

J.S. and Sirius shared a glance.

"Ron and Hermione?" Sirius asked.

At Harry's nod, both of the men chuckled. "That would be fine, Harry," her father affirmed. "I understand the bond you have with your friends—it would be good for you to have your support group better trained as well."

The talk then turned to other matters and continued for some time, Harry by now completely charming Fleur's entire family. She had not known what to expect from Harry—her interactions with him during the previous year had been sporadic and rather impersonal. He was not as she had expected.

J.S. watched his family interact with their guests, especially with one Harry Potter, and he was pleased with what he had seen from their

interactions. Harry had quickly and effortlessly charmed the entire Delacour family, and he was certain Fleur had begun to get to know the young man she would eventually marry. She was a good girl and had always made him proud—he wanted the best for her, and although he had only known young Harry for a day, he was quickly becoming of the opinion that Harry was it. This was working out better than he had imagined.

As for Harry, it was clearer than ever that Harry lacked the confidence that an exceptional young man such as himself should have at his age, and it was also obvious that it was the Dursleys' influence which was at the root of his problems. His association with J.S.' family should go a long way to helping him gain that confidence which only acceptance and love could instill. Looking around at his family, J.S. could see them all riveted on whatever the young man was saying—Gabrielle (he had to chuckle at the obvious hero worship and infatuation his youngest was showing) seemed almost unable to take her eyes off of him, while his wife was quite enamored of the young man. If they had been young and still in their dating phase, J.S. fancied that he might almost feel threatened by the attention she was showing him.

Fleur was the difficult one. Though she was beginning to get to know Harry Potter, her manners and ways of expressing herself were still somewhat reserved, something he knew she had picked up as a defense mechanism against the sometimes open hostility she often experienced from other girls her age. Still, she seemed to have made a good start with him, and he certainly could not expect her to throw herself into his arms and declare undying love only a few hours after his arrival. J.S. believed in his heart that they were a very good match—they only needed time to get to know one another better.

The other things he had learned that day—the state of the British Ministry and of the Minister in particular—well, he had known what the situation was prior to his trip into Britain that morning. However, seeing it firsthand was a shock—it was clear that the Ministry, as long as Fudge was at the helm, would be of no help whatsoever. It bore some consideration for their future and could necessitate removing Harry from Britain if things became too bad there. It was a step J.S. was loath to take, as he knew that retaking a hostile land would be much more difficult fighting a hostile force from within.

And that was another matter—this secret society of Dumbledore's which Sirius had discussed with him. He would have to contact Dumbledore at the first opportunity and discover what exactly it was, what their goals were, and how they meant to fight the battle he knew was on the horizon. If it was something he could in all conscience support, then he would have to, not only for the sake of his family, but also for the sake of the young man who had entered their lives.

## Chapter 6 – Baby Steps

The first few days after Harry's arrival were hectic, filled with various activities as the Delacour family tried to cram as much into their only two days in France as they could. Through it all, Harry was polite and cheerful—if a little overwhelmed—but the way in which he went about his new life with an almost childlike joy and wonder made it clear that he had never taken part in most of those activities before—his relatives had kept him from it. It appeared he had gone about life as a passive viewer—never really part of anything—a family, a group of friends, or anything like them—he simply had moved from one situation to another with no real purpose or thought and no welcome from the reprehensible Muggles. Although it was never voiced out loud within his hearing, his new family was filled with disgust at his old guardians, and in the confines of their own minds, more than one of them thought about a healthy dose of revenge against the loathsome family.

To combat his hesitance and uncertainty, his new family, by unspoken agreement, simply tried to be open and friendly—the Delacours took special care as a family to ensure that he knew they had his best interests at heart and that they cared for his happiness. It took some time, but it seemed as though the two days in France went a long way toward making him feel comfortable and welcome in their home and in their presence. The elder Delacours made him feel like his opinion mattered when they spoke with him, listening when he had something to say and taking the time to talk to him, explaining things he did not understand and patiently guiding him when required. The younger members of the family contributed in a slightly different manner—Gabrielle became his shadow, rarely letting him leave her side, while Fleur was friendly and polite, yet still maintaining the reserve she had shown the first evening. Sirius, of course, was the same as ever—the consummate Marauder—as he joked and laughed and told stories of his escapades as a young man with Harry's father.

The day after his arrival in France, Harry was treated to a new phenomenon—the concept of women and shopping. The Delacour women were not fanatical shoppers—they tended to get what they needed when they needed and did not spend an excessive amount of time browsing. But a case such as Harry's—where it was clear he required everything from the basics to a more formal style—caught the imaginations of Apolline and her daughters, and they found

themselves eagerly anticipating the upcoming trip and the opportunity to assist Harry in finally coming into his own as the powerful and confident young man and wizard into which he was to grow. The first step in this endeavor was that he had to look and dress the part.

The day after his arrival, the entire family Portkeyed away from the castle to the French equivalent of Diagon Alley to peruse the shops and make certain Harry was outfitted with whatever wizard robes he would need for the coming year. As with Diagon Alley, the district was small, and there was nothing there he would not have seen in his own country, so things went very smoothly, leaving the young man to wonder why Sirius and J.S. were so amused at the thought of a shopping date with the women.

But then the true fun had begun. Exiting the magical shopping area, they had entered a nearby Muggle district with shops as far as the eye could see—and the wonder and curiosity on Harry's face had been priceless. The women, their imaginations on fire as to how they could build the young man's wardrobe from the ground up, immediately dragged him off, intent on seeing him clothed properly and his cast-off rags from Dudley burned as soon as may be.

Thus had begun a marathon of shopping, and by the end of it, Harry was feeling as though he had tried on and modeled every piece of clothing in the Muggle world. They included, but were not limited to, shirts, pants, sweaters, jackets, and shoes—all of them in casual and formal styles, many of which he would never have thought to even look at had he been on his own. The ladies had been positively indefatigable, and their energy had been astounding—Harry had thought they would never quit.

Everything he looked at or tried on was either approved or rejected by the ladies, who at times did not even listen to his opinion, if he had even had one to give. It had finally taken a shirt which they had forced him to try on—one he decided he would not be caught dead in—which had forced them to listen to his opinions on his new wardrobe. Of course, Apolline had been amused by his sudden recalcitrance, smirking as she told him that she had been waiting for him to make up his mind and dig in his heels. After that incident, it had gone much more smoothly, as everything was first agreed upon by Harry before the ladies approved or, conversely, exercised their veto power.

However, this new meeting of the minds did not seriously limit the number of different outfits to try on. They literally spent the entirety of an afternoon at it, and all were exhausted by the time Harry walked away from the shopping center carrying bags and bags worth of pants—denim, cotton, formal—as well as several shirts of all kinds and socks, shoes, boxers and all of the accessories the ladies had decided he needed. Then his new family had coaxed him into wearing some of his purchases, and a quick Incendio in an out-of-the-way alley did away with the old baggy clothes he had been wearing.

Seeing how much they were purchasing, Harry had begged Apolline to allow him to pay for his own purchases, but she was firm—Harry was now part of the family, and as such, the Delacours would now treat him as one of their own children, which included providing him with the essentials in clothing, shelter, food and the love and care of a family. It was a slightly choked-up Harry who left the shopping malls behind, clutching bags upon bags of his new possessions and feeling slightly overwhelmed.

That evening, they ate dinner at an expensive restaurant in Paris. Not ever having an experience to compare with, Harry was amazed at the excellence of the cuisine, while simultaneously being concerned that he would make some serious faux pas and embarrass himself. His new family quickly allayed his fears and made him feel welcome, while Sirius teased him out of his reticent mood; soon he was laughing along with the family and having a wonderful time.

The next day was spent taking in some of the sights of France. Jean-Sebastian explained to Harry that although they could not stay long, he could hardly be here without seeing some of the major sights. So, Harry was able to go to the Eiffel Tower in Paris, see some of the more famous locations on the Champs Elysees, the Arc du Triomphe, as well as a few other locations he had always heard of, but never visited. In all, it was an eye-opening experience for Harry and served to draw him closer to his new family.

They were also days for Harry to get to know his newly betrothed. Both had felt that they had gotten a good start during their conversation from the previous night, but they also realized it would take some effort for them each to get to know the other. The first



part of that bonding process was for them both to understand the other in contrast to their preconceptions and their commonly held misconceptions.

For Fleur's part, she wanted to know more about him—she had heard his stories of his adventures and had heard all the so-called "official" information about Harry Potter, but he was to be her husband, and it was simply not enough. She was resigned to the match, but still she had reservations, as she had so honestly disclosed to him on his first evening in France, and the best way to remove those reservations was for the two of them to become better acquainted and knowledgeable about each other.

This had entailed taking as much time as their event-filled days before their departure would allow, and although it upset Gabrielle to a certain extent, they had spent much of the following evening shut up in a room together and walking about the park in which the chateau stood. Gabrielle was soon put to rights by her mother, who reprimanded her gently and reminded her that Harry was Fleur's betrothed and that they needed to get to know one another without the interference from others—Harry would spend time with her, but she must not be so possessive of him. Gabrielle had sulked a little when told this, but her better nature took over, and she was soon able to interact with Harry more like a typical nine-year-old rather than with the clingy hero worship which had characterized her actions before. Not that the hero worship still did not show up from time to time...

The conversations between Harry and Fleur generally revolved around how Harry felt about the situations in which he had found himself. Fleur had already heard about the events themselves, so she had the information; however, she felt that knowing about Harry's feelings would help her to get to know him better. In addition, she asked him about his childhood at the Dursleys and induced him to talk about his friends at Hogwarts, his impressions of the education there, and anything else he could be persuaded to speak of.

However, it was not only a one-way passing of information—Harry was just as curious about his betrothed as she was him. He was unable to get her to discuss much of her experiences at Beauxbatons—she told him she was not ready, and it really did not matter anyway—but when it came to her times with her family and

her abilities as a witch and a Veela, she was much more forthcoming.

There were two events which particularly illuminated her character to Harry, causing him to gain no small measure of respect for his newly betrothed.

The morning after Harry's arrival at Chateau Delacour, he had knocked on Fleur's bedroom door, intending to escort her down to breakfast. They chatted amiably on the way down, entering the dining room to see that they were the last arrivals. Harry, seeing the breakfast foods spread out on the table and suddenly feeling the hunger for the morning repast, motioned for her to precede him to the table, only to find that she had already moved from his side.

He watched as she strode purposefully to the table and stopped by Sirius' chair, her hands on her hips as she glared down at the former Marauder.

"Sirius Black!"

Sirius started and stared up in surprise, even while J.S. chortled at the scene playing out in front of their eyes.

"I do not know what you have done, my friend, but my daughter glaring at you in that manner is not a good sign!"

"I would not make such comments, Father, dear," Fleur retorted with an incongruously sweet smile. "I have some words for you as well."

With Fleur focused on another, Sirius had managed to reign in his surprise, and he peered back up at her, a charming smile now plastered upon his face. "And what can I do for you, my lady?"

"You can start by explaining why you did not tell Harry about the marriage contract before he had to walk in to that trial."

Whatever Sirius had been expecting, this was clearly not it. "Well... I... I mean, we... thought that it would be better to keep it a secret," he stammered. "Dumbledore felt that we should keep it to ourselves until the trial."

Fleur raised an elegant eyebrow. "And Dumbledore rules over house Black?" was her rhetorical—not to mention slightly sarcastic—question.

Upon seeing Sirius had nothing to say in response, she continued, "Besides, I know how you British revere the Headmaster, but truthfully, I am not convinced he has Harry's best interests at heart."

Sirius began to sputter in response, but he was ruthlessly drowned out by the irate young woman. "I do not think he is evil, Sirius, but he did leave Harry in a very poor environment for years when he surely could have found alternate arrangements."

A sigh and a weary hand over his eyes was Sirius' response. "I cannot help but agree with you. I argued that myself with him, but he was convinced Lily's blood protection was the best means of defense for Harry."

"They may have protected him from Death Eaters," Fleur retorted, "but certainly not from the neglect of his guardians."

Jean-Sebastian Delacour had had many more years to know his daughter and understand her moods—in this case, he evidently felt she was serious in her displeasure, and he attempted a conciliatory tone.

"I suppose you are correct, Fleur—we should have told Harry before the trial. There simply was not a lot of time or opportunity, and as Sirius said, secrecy was paramount. But all is well, and Harry is no longer bound to stay with his relatives. I can promise he will not be going back while either Sirius or I have guardianship over him. And again, as Sirius has said, the utmost secrecy needed to be kept, so as to spring the surprise on the Minister without allowing him time to form a counter strategy."

Apolline, who was astonished by the revelation and just as displeased about it as her daughter, joined forces with her against the men. "Oh, you thought Harry was not to be trusted to keep information about his own future secret?" she asked with an arch look.

When confronted by both of his female family members—not to mention Gabrielle, who, even though she did not understand fully of

what they were speaking, at least knew that it was about the boy she practically worshipped—Jean-Sebastian apparently realized that retreat was the best option.

"You are completely correct, my dear. From now on, Harry will be informed of everything which concerns him."

"Sure thing, pup," Sirius chimed in, catching on quickly. "I would have told you, but I couldn't get a moment when you were apart from Ron and Hermione. And it didn't help that Molly was always hovering around you. You know how nosy she can be."

Harry pondered his godfather's words for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Thanks, Sirius. I would appreciate knowing about stuff like this from now on."

"Everything, father," Fleur interrupted. "I am not a child, and neither is Harry—we need to know when something important is about to happen and when you learn of any crucial information. Harry needs to be better prepared than he has been, and it starts with telling him everything."

That incident highlighted the fact that Fleur was no pushover, and Harry filed that little tidbit away for future reference. And it would certainly be a novelty to be told about things in advance, something which Dumbledore, for all the good things which he had done, had never seen fit to do.

Late the evening of the shopping trip, Harry had had another conversation with Fleur, in which he learned much more about Veela—and about some of the buttons which, when pushed, really angered his betrothed.

It was rather late, and their discussion had already gone on for some hours. They were sequestered in Fleur's bedroom, to which they had retired upon their return from the shopping trip, and there they had talked about many things. Harry was finally feeling like he was slowly coming to know her. The conversation was casual, as they sprawled across her bed talking about anything and everything.

The discussion had turned to Veela again, specifically the allure, and Harry, curious about its effects, asked Fleur how she used it and what the defenses were against it.

"It is difficult to explain, Harry," she responded after a moment's thought. "I simply... exert myself, although that is not the right word. It feels like... projecting an aura."

Harry considered the explanation. "So, it's kind of like you extend your senses out or something?"

"Not exactly." Fleur thought for a moment before picking up the explanation. "Think about what happens when someone is wearing perfume—you can smell the perfume for a few meters around that person."

Grimacing in distaste, Harry nodded. "Yeah, but it depends on how much you use. I swear that one girl in my year bathes in it—you can smell her a mile off—more if you're downwind."

A delighted laugh was Fleur's response. "I will have to learn to avoid her—I do not care much for perfume. The principle is the same, Harry. With the allure, I create an aura that's not unlike the scent of perfume. Now, of course, there are differences—what I create is not a smell, exactly, but more like a magical field mixed with pheromones, which affects men to various degrees. And I can direct it, to a certain extent. For example, I could specifically direct it towards a single person in a room full of people—the other men in the room would not be unaffected by it, but they would not receive the full dose the one I directed it at would."

"Does the allure work on women?"

"No, Harry, women are immune from its effects."

"And are there any defenses?"

"Some, such as yourself have natural defenses, while others who know a branch of mind magic called Occlumency are also afforded a certain measure of protection. The other protection is love, Harry."

The intense look she directed at him made him feel like he was under her scrutiny.

"If a man is in love with a woman, then his feelings for her will lessen the effect of the allure. Most Veela magic is largely love-based, Harry, although the allure is admittedly more connected to lust than love. And because lust is a pale offshoot of the emotion of love, a true loving feeling for another person trumps the allure and makes it much easier for the man to resist."

"And what else can your magic do if it is based on love?"

Fleur looked uncomfortable but gamely met his gaze and forged on. "Well, Harry, Veela partnerships are renowned for their strength and closeness. If you and I ever have the good fortune to bond with each other in a truly loving way, we will become closer than most normal couples can ever dream. If we ever truly love-bond, I will know without a doubt of your love for me—it's simply part of my powers. I can also tell when others share the emotion. In addition, when we are married and become... intimate with each other, I will know exactly how to please you—it is ingrained in me to know what my lover requires in a mate. It is the reason why Veela were prized as concubines throughout history—what man would not want to have a woman who could effortlessly become exactly what he wants and needs?"

Now, Harry was not a true innocent—the education he had gotten in school just before entering for Hogwarts ensured he had at least some knowledge—but it did not take a lot of imagination to determine why having a woman who could please him was a good thing. The conversation was slightly embarrassing, but already Harry had a much healthier respect for Fleur than he had ever had before—she was more of a sex object to most men than any movie star or supermodel ever could be, and yet she was poised, confident, and modest, not reveling in her ability to catch anyone she wanted. His hopes for the relationship rose even higher due to her obvious self-effacing manner.

"I can see how that could be a problem."

An unhappy sigh was his response. "Yes, it is a problem. I have been propositioned regularly since I was twelve years old."

Harry blinked. "Twelve?"

She nodded. "Veela hit puberty about the same time as normal girls, but until we have gained a little control, there is some... leakage, for want of a better term. The boys my age at Beauxbatons had no defense against it. As I got older and learned to control it better, the situation improved, but by then the damage had already been done. To most of them, I was just a plaything—they would put the moves on me, trying to be masculine and suave in front of their friends. Many times, I had boys try to get me into broom closets, and they generally made my life miserable. And since I can sense true emotion to a certain extent, I knew that none of them were interested in me, just in using me."

The frown on Harry's face was thunderous as he thought of what his betrothed would likely face even at Hogwarts.

"There will be none of that at Hogwarts," he growled. "I'll hex anyone who tries anything!"

Reaching across with a smile on her face, Fleur grasped his hand and squeezed. "Thank you, Harry—it is very sweet of you to want to protect me."

But Harry was still not amused. "I want you to tell me if anyone tries anything, Fleur. I know we're still working through this, but no one will be allowed to take liberties with you."

Fleur inclined her head and lay back down, resting her head in the palm of her hand. "Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Well, there was one other thing..." he started cautiously, instinctively knowing his next question would likely upset her. "I understand that some consider Veela to be non-human..."

He was correct; the expression on her face quickly became cold, and when she spoke, her voice was like an Antarctic wind.

"I am every bit as human as you or anyone else, Harry—do not let anyone tell you anything else."

"I never thought any differently, Fleur," he responded, speaking in a calm and rational tone of voice. "I just wanted to know what your thoughts about it are—I can assure you that you will hear about it

when we go to Hogwarts—from the Purebloods in Slytherin, if no one else."

Fleur's expression quickly changed to chagrin, and she apologized for her outburst. "I am sorry, Harry, I should not have reacted in such a way."

"It's understandable," Harry responded, squeezing her hand in a comforting gesture, returning her actions from moments earlier. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay."

"No, Harry, you will be a target of some of the bigotry by being betrothed to me, so you should know the consequences."

She was silent as she considered her words, clearly trying to find the right balance between outrage and imparting a true sense of the situation. Harry was quiet, allowing her to think about her response and half wishing he had not asked the question in the first place.

"I apologize again for my reactions, Harry," she finally said. "It was a reflex response to the intolerance I have had to put up with my entire life, though I suspect it is not as prevalent here as it is in your society."

Harry nodded, and she continued. "Bigots prefer to think of Veela as being non-human, but the fact of the matter is that we are every bit as human as those who like to promote their agenda of hatred. Veela roots have been traced back to the sirens of Greek mythology, although our origins before that time are much murkier—The Odyssey is the first mention of the race which would come to be known as Veela."

"There are no earlier records?"

Fleur shook her head. "No, but of course there are legends—it is impossible to know the truth, though. Some say the first Veela was a result of some long-forgotten spell which has since been lost to time. Others contend that our existence goes all the way back beyond the time when magic was recognized as a talent, long before any kind of training—even word of mouth—was developed. It is thought that the world long ago was rife with wild magic, and all magical creatures came into existence at this time. Living creatures were affected by the forces of the wild magic and adapted to survive. In any case,



physiologically, I am exactly the same as any other woman—regardless of the truth of the origins of Veela, the first of us was a human woman who was changed in some manner by magic. All else is passed down from that time."

"And what do you believe to be the truth of your origins?"

A smile crept over Fleur's face. "It does not really matter what I think. I am a human, the same as any other woman. I simply have a few extra abilities and a much higher chance of giving birth to girls rather than boys. I think it is our nature's way of preserving Veela—as there are no male Veela, our magic forces us to have girls, which perpetuates our race and abilities. The population of Veela generally stays the same or grows only slightly overall. It also seems to be a case of preserving the rest of the human race—can you imagine what would happen if Veela could give birth to many children?"

Harry thought about it for a few moments, but the results were rather obvious. "Eventually, if Veela only give birth to Veela girls, then there would be more and more Veela."

"Exactly. Then, there eventually be a large disparity in the numbers of the sexes—for every boy born to a Veela, approximately nine girls are born, which would cause massive problems for the world. And can you imagine what would happen with so many Veela in the world?"

The implications were obvious. "Veela, with their powers, would generally have the advantage in gaining a mate."

"Exactly. It would take many generations, but ultimately, I believe that the only women left would be Veela. So, I believe that the way Veela reproduce protects both the Veela populations and the population of the world as a whole.

"Which brings us to another point, Harry," she continued. "The fact that we will only have girls is a problem for the continuation of your house."

"What do you mean?"

Fleur shook her head in exasperation. "I keep forgetting that you were not brought up in magical society. The Potters go back

centuries, Harry, right back to the time of your founders. If we only have girls, you will not have a son to carry on your name—this is something that is very important, especially to old Pureblood families."

She was right—Harry had never thought to consider this before. "But can't a girl inherit?"

"Yes, she can, but the Potter name would not continue, which is a very big deal to the right families—for example, take the Blacks. If Sirius does not marry and have a son, his name would die out, and his name is at least as old as yours."

"So, what do we do?"

Harry had the distinct feeling Fleur was feeling him out for some unfathomable reason, but she did not elaborate on her comments. "There are other ways of ensuring your name continues, Harry, but I think I would like to hold off discussing them for now. I would prefer to continue to get to know each other before we think about such serious subjects."

Agreeing with her—although being curious as to her meaning—Harry nevertheless allowed the conversation to move to other lighter topics. It was very late before he finally sought his own bed, feeling more than pleased that he and Fleur had been able to make the progress they had.

For Apolline Delacour, the two days spent in her future son-in-law's company were enjoyable and very revealing. He was reserved and quiet, generally speaking his opinion in a thoughtful yet diffident manner, especially when that opinion was something which he did not feel strongly or have specific knowledge about. But when he spoke of things with which he had experience, his confidence shone through, and Apolline could see a different side of him—a side which held great promise. For instance, when questioned about Quidditch, he responded with several stories about his time playing the game and experiences he had had. But underlying his exposition about the game was his talk of flying—and that revealed his true passion. It was clear he enjoyed the game, but by and large it was merely a release and an excuse to go flying on his broom.

He was polite and kind, treating everyone around him with deference and respect, something Apolline wondered about considering his upbringing by those horrid Muggles with whom he had lived. Given what she had heard of the confrontation with the Dursleys, she would have expected him to grow up to be bitter and vengeful, filled with the need to prove himself. It was still very early in their relationship, yet although she could detect some of the latter in his manner, there was none of the former. She suspected he could be as angry and petulant as the next person, but the true bitterness of spirit seemed absent from his character; he appeared to accept the first fifteen years of his life and his time with the Dursleys with a certain fatalistic resignation, even while he struggled to become a member of Apolline's family.

It was a period of adjustment for the young man, and Apolline could clearly see the difficulty he had, especially when he was praised for something or overwhelmed by the welcome of the family. Apolline also suspected he was desperate to fit in with this family, not only because of the fact that he would one day marry into it, but also because he recognized they had taken a large risk in supporting him.

It was not an issue which Apolline had any concerns about whatsoever—in fact, the family was impressed (she was impressed) by his manner and character. She had been dubious about the marriage contract at first—he was, after all, a famous wizard and a target of one of the greatest dark wizards of the past millennium. However, now that she was getting to know him and understand his past and see a glimpse of his future, she had no concerns about how Harry would treat Fleur. She was now coming to view it as a very fortunate alliance.

True, he still did have the aforementioned dark lord to contend with, but really, the whole magical world was in danger. She did not know why Harry had been targeted, but she was quickly coming to the understanding that he could become a great wizard with the proper guidance. Jean-Sebastian was a good man and could provide that desperately needed male influence in Harry's life. Together, as a family, they would help the young man grow and become what she knew he could be.

The day of the move, Apolline was sitting in Gabrielle's bedroom, thinking about the changes to their lives, when her husband walked into the room. Sensing his hesitation, Apolline's eyes narrowed in

anticipation of the subject of whatever he wished to discuss. If it was as she suspected, he may as well hold his breath.

"Yes, love?" she greeted him, prompting him to smile and approach her.

"Apolline," he began after seating himself and taking one of her hands, "I wish you would reconsider and stay behind in France with Gabrielle."

Apolline huffed her exasperation, wondering if the man would ever give up. "Jean-Sebastian Delacour, we have already had this discussion!"

A lesser man might have quailed at her displeasure, but her husband merely gave her a mischievous smile which still caused her heart to do back flips in her chest, even after almost two decades of marriage. Damn the man and what he did to her!

"We have had the conversation, but the result was not to my satisfaction. That means I must have it again, does it not?"

"Our conversation may not have been to your satisfaction, but it was to mine," Apolline retorted. "If you think I will allow you to go into danger while I stay behind, you had better seriously revise your way of thinking."

"Apolline, please be reasonable—"

"No, Jean-Sebastian, I will not be reasonable. We are a family, and we will stay together as a family. We have taken a young man into our lives, and I mean to give him every bit of my support, as I know you intend to do yourself. That support does not entail staying behind in France. My place is with you."

"But Apolline, think about the danger—think about Gabrielle. It will be very difficult to do what must be done when I must constantly worry about you both."

"Then you should have thought about that before you decided to enact the marriage contract."

He started to speak again, but Apolline placed a finger over his mouth, compelling him to silence. He was a good man—the very best of men—but he sometimes had a tendency to treat her and their daughters as though they were made of porcelain. While she loved him for it, she was a fully trained witch, and she had her Veela abilities to fall back on if she was to run into any trouble.

"Jean-Sebastian, I will not stay behind, so you may as well save your breath. If things become too difficult, then we will send Gabrielle to live with her grandmother, but I will not leave your side. You do not need to treat me with kid gloves—I will be fine."

His long look was expressionless, but to one who knew him intimately, his struggle was evident.

"You will not give in on this matter, will you?"

"No."

He looked down and sighed before glancing back at her with a lopsided grin on his face.

"I thought as much. Whatever possessed me to marry a strong-willed woman?"

The chuckle he received in response was amused. "Come now, Jean-Sebastian, you like me the way I am—admit it."

"I do—I just wish I could keep you out of danger."

"That you cannot do. Think of it this way—if this Voldemort takes over England, where do you think his next stop will be?"

"I have already considered this," he responded softly.

"Then you know that even France is not truly safe. In fact, I would be surprised if he does not already have agents here recruiting for his cause—certain members of our society can be as bigoted and short-sighted as those across the channel. You know this. In fact, I think Gabrielle and I are safer with you in England than we would be here."

Jean-Sebastian gave a resigned sigh and leaned over to kiss his wife on the cheek before rising. "There is still much to be done."

Apolline rose also and began to busy herself, sorting through Gabrielle's clothes. But before her husband left, she had one more thing to say.

"Jean-Sebastian, please do not bring this up again—I have made up my mind."

Pausing at the door, Jean-Sebastian glanced back at her and smiled. "I can see that you have. The subject is closed, and I will not speak of it again."

Satisfied, Apolline returned to her task as her husband left the room.

The rest of that Saturday afternoon was spent ensuring all the family's belongings were packed away and transported to their new homes by the house-elves. This consisted primarily of clothes and personal effects, the furniture not being needed, except for a few items which were deemed necessary—including Jean-Sebastian's well-worn but comfortable office chair. It was Apolline's housekeeping which kept their transported belongings to a minimum, as she had spent the afternoon going through the family's clothes, putting aside old items to be discarded or donated and generally ensuring everything the family would need would be on hand. Of course, Harry's clothes, which had largely been purchased the previous day, were the easiest, as they were simply left in their bags, ready for transportation.

They were all touched a little by Sirius' melancholy—still considered a fugitive in the eyes of the British Ministry, he was to stay at Chateau Delacour to continue his recovery and await his trial, which had tentatively been scheduled for the middle of the following month. Still, although he was a little glum, Sirius roused himself to do a little teasing of his godson, promising to see him again at the trial and during the upcoming winter break.

The end result of the day's efforts was that the family arrived early that evening, stored their belongings in their chosen bedrooms, and sat down for the evening meal, tired but happy—at least in Harry's case—to be back in England.

It was at this point that Jean-Sebastian, having accomplished the welcoming of his new ward into the family and having moved his family to England, decided that it was time to follow up with his resolution to contact Dumbledore about the secret society of which he was the head.

He made his way to his office and made a Floo call—correctly deducing the Headmaster would be in his office at Hogwarts—asking for a quick meeting to discuss certain items of interest. Dumbledore readily assented, proposing they meet at Grimmauld Place to give Harry a chance to connect once again with his friends. It was done quickly, and a mere thirty minutes later, Jean-Sebastian was travelling through the Floo connection along with Harry and Fleur.

They stepped into the parlor, and Jean-Sebastian was gratified to see the greeting Harry received from his friends. He had heard much about Harry's friends over the past two days, particularly one Hermione Granger, who was at that very moment engulfing his new ward into a huge hug, much as she had done when they had arrived after the trial. It was good to know that Harry had a support group to rally around him—he suspected it would be needed in what was to come.

The only concern he had was fleeting and resolved quickly.

"Hey, guys," Harry began. "I'd like to introduce you all to my betrothed, Fleur Delacour."

The silence only lasted a moment before Hermione, visibly screwing herself up, stepped over and greeted the young French witch. "Hello, Fleur. My name is Hermione Granger. Welcome to Grimmauld Place."

Jean-Sebastian let out a relieved sigh, one which was echoed, he noticed, albeit in a much quieter fashion, by Fleur. His daughter returned the greeting hesitantly, but her smile was genuine and wide.

The twins approached Fleur, and each made bows, complete with elaborate flourishes, and smiled winning smiles at her.

"Any friend of Harry's is a friend of ours."

"She's his fiancée, George."

"I'm not George, I'm Fred! And I'd hope that she's his friend, too."

"His friend? Wouldn't you like to be her friend? And don't call yourself Fred when we both know I'm Fred."

"You're delusional. And of course I want to be her friend. Blokes like us look so much better when we have pretty friends."

"Shh... Don't say that too loud. You'll make little Harrikins angry for moving in on his girl."

"I'm not moving on his girl—just trying to make myself look better by basking in the light of her glory."

"Well, just as long as you make certain everyone knows you're George when you make a fool out of yourself, that's fine. I'd prefer you didn't sully my name."

"There you go again!"

"There I go? It's you who persists in thinking you're Fred."

"Well, then, I guess we'll just have fall back on our old standby."

"Gred and Forge?"

"Yes, but remember—I'm Gred."

"But I'm..."

"Will you two stop it already?" Hermione's voice interrupted. She was not precisely scowling at them, but her expression did hold a certain amused exasperation. She turned back to Fleur, who had been following their banter back and forth, much as she would have followed a tennis match.

"This is Fred and George, the Weasley twins. Don't let them get going, or they can go on for hours."

"Yup, that's us!" one of the twins piped in.



"You can call us Fred, George, Gred, Forge—it's all the same to us."

Fleur could not hold in a laugh at their antics, and she visibly relaxed, which was no doubt their purpose in their confusing duologue.

"Fleur will be attending Hogwarts this year," advised Harry. "She'll be in your year."

The two boys looked at one another before turning back to Fleur and favoring her with a huge smile. "Brilliant!" they exclaimed in unison.

"If you guys are quite finished, there are a couple of more introductions to complete."

Hermione turned to the other two redheaded children and quickly made the introductions. Their responses, however, were certainly not as welcoming and warm as the twins' had been. The youngest son, Ron, appeared too tongue-tied to formulate a coherent response—something with which Jean-Sebastian knew that Fleur was intimately familiar—and the girl, Ginevra, appeared to be sizing up Jean-Sebastian's daughter with a frown on her face.

So, that's how it stands, thought Jean-Sebastian. The evening of the trial, he had thought Mrs. Weasley and her daughter were a trifle cold, although he had not had the opportunity to observe them. The young woman in particular would bear keeping an eye on.

The door to the room opened at that moment, and the Headmaster walked in, greeting everyone cheerfully.

Once the pleasantries had been completed, Dumbledore invited Jean-Sebastian to a nearby study. Confident that his daughter would be well taken care of by Harry and his friends, Jean-Sebastian acquiesced, and they were soon leaving the room.

Their initial conversation consisted of pleasantries and discussions of the situation, punctuated by Dumbledore's approval of Jean-Sebastian's involvement in Harry's life.

"I am glad to hear young Harry is settling into his life with your family," Dumbledore finally stated after hearing Jean-Sebastian's

recitation of the past few days. "I believe it will be good for him to witness firsthand how a wizarding family lives."

Jean-Sebastian directed a piercing stare at the Headmaster. "I must admit that I am uncertain as to why you left Harry with those Muggles. I had heard of their treatment of him, but even so, I was unprepared for what I witnessed. They treated him like he was diseased, Dumbledore, denying him the basics of human love and affection. I am amazed that he has turned out as well as he has."

At that moment, Albus Dumbledore looked every one of his 114 years. He passed a hand over his eyes and rubbed his temples briefly before raising his eyes back to his companion and sighing heavily.

"Unfortunately—or fortunately, perhaps—you don't know what it was like here after the war, Jean-Sebastian. The country was in celebration, yet—although Voldemort had been defeated—there was still some question as to who had supported the Dark Lord.

"Oh, certain Death Eaters were obvious and had been well-known supporters, with incontrovertible proof existing of their complicity and crimes—those such as the LeStranges, Mulciber and Crouch Jr. were easily convicted. They still reside in Azkaban to this day."

"And Malfoy? I understand he was as involved as anyone."

"And I am afraid you are correct. However, Malfoy was not known to have committed any crimes, although it is certain he did while in his Death Eater robes. He and others, such as Walden MacNair, were more difficult to pin down, even though we had known of their participation and, more importantly, the fact that they had financed Voldemort's operations."

Jean-Sebastian gazed at Dumbledore in disbelief. "Then why was Veritaserum not used? I remember reports of the time that its use had been rejected, but the reasons were not clear."

"It was not as easy as you might think," Dumbledore responded, a thoughtful look etched upon his face. "We were in disarray, even with Voldemort's defeat, and our justice system was in shambles. The Minister approved the use of Veritaserum, but as the Wizengamot serves as the judicial branch of our government, they

were able to overturn her directive. Therefore, people like Malfoy were able to claim the influence of the Imperius curse and successfully avoid their time in Azkaban. Unfortunately, I was not Chief Warlock at that time, and although I had been a member for years and had a certain amount of influence, I was not able to sway the Wizengamot away from that disastrous course."

"But why would the Wizengamot effectively hobble its own ability to deal out justice?"

"Because the Pureblood faction was concerned that they would lose their influence by virtue of the fact that many of their members had supported Voldemort and would lose their seats as a result. They were able to beg, buy, and threaten the rest of the Wizengamot to forego the use of Veritaserum, claiming it was an 'infringement on the rights of its most upstanding members.'"

The explanation made sense and matched what Jean-Sebastian remembered of the time. The reports from France had been sporadic and incomplete, and although Voldemort had made headlines in the French papers, wizarding France had at the time largely contented itself with viewing the situation as a British problem. To Jean-Sebastian, it had seemed more like a determination for them to stick their collective heads in the sand and ignore a situation which had the potential to become a huge international problem rather than merely a British one.

What he was not certain of, was exactly how this influenced Harry's placement with his mother's sister. Surely Dumbledore could have found someone trustworthy to raise the boy.

"And Harry?" he prompted.

"Harry presented a unique problem," Dumbledore answered. "Ideally, I would have placed him with Sirius, but given the fact that we all believed Sirius to be a traitor, I was not certain who to leave him with. I admit, there was a certain panic to my thoughts at the time—after all, if Sirius, who was closer than a brother to James, could be a traitor, anyone could be.

"So, I placed him with the one family I could be certain was not affiliated with the Death Eaters—knowing the Dursleys' aversion to magic, I knew that they would, at the very least, keep him safe from

the Death Eaters as long as a strong set of wards was erected to keep his presence a secret. I used Lily's blood protection as a means to erect the wards which would keep him safe from discovery by any hostile magical. This was intended to be temporary until I found another solution."

"So, what happened?" Jean-Sebastian inquired. He was beginning to understand that Harry's residence at the Dursleys was an unfortunate string of circumstances and not the callous abandonment he had feared. At least, he hoped that was the case—it would be a disaster if Dumbledore proved to be untrustworthy. The man was far too important to the future fight, not to mention the fact that Jean-Sebastian's children would be under the man's authority for the better part of every year.

"That is when the second problem appeared," Dumbledore responded with a shrug. "I failed to predict the instant fame for the young boy and the outpouring of sympathy and support. Overnight, there were petitions and applications to provide him a home registered by the dozen, and I could not take the chance that someone less than trustworthy would have gained custody of him—that would have spelled disaster."

"You think they would have had him killed?"

Dumbledore's face was thoughtful. "That was one possible outcome. There was another, and both depended entirely upon how much information the Dark Lord had shared with his minions."

"What do you mean?"

"He—or at least his parents—were known to have been targeted by the Dark Lord himself. Therefore, if that is all that was known, then I think he would have been brought up, indoctrinated with the ideals of the Purebloods."

"But they recruited based on blood purity, and Harry is not a Pureblood."

"They were not as biased as they wanted everyone to believe," Dumbledore refuted. "All that was required for admittance was to show a sufficient level of personal loyalty to Voldemort, a thirst for power, and some level of blood purity. They did not accept

Muggleborn members, but anyone with at least one magical parent was welcome with certain restrictions."

It made a certain amount of sense. After all, whatever else Voldemort had been, he was not stupid, and to limit his recruiting to a mere ten percent of the population when trying to take over a nation would have been short-sighted in the extreme.

"Then Harry in the hands of former Death Eaters would have been a problem."

"In more ways than one," Dumbledore responded. He then flicked his wand, and a series of privacy spells shot toward the door and the walls, effectively rendering them imperturbable and silenced. Jean-Sebastian raised an eyebrow at the Headmaster's actions, but Dumbledore merely smiled at him.

"What I am about to reveal to you must not leave the confines of this room. Although I don't believe anyone is listening to us, I cannot take that chance—the Weasley twins in particular are known to be ingenious inventors and have managed to ferret out some impressive secrets over the course of their short lives."

Jean-Sebastian gazed at the Headmaster. Although his words about the twins had been somewhat light and slightly amused, there was no amusement in his manner. Whatever he had to impart, he deemed it critical to Harry's safety—that was enough to convince Jean-Sebastian to follow his lead.

"Do you require a magical oath?"

Dumbledore nodded his approval. "Thank you for the offer, but no—I know your character through our interactions in the ICW and believe you are devoted to Harry's protection. Your word will suffice."

"Then you have it."

"Very well. The reason Harry was targeted by Voldemort was a prophecy which was given to me when I was interviewing a candidate for the position of Divinations Professor the spring before Harry was born."

A frown came over Jean-Sebastian's face. "I must admit I have little faith in divination—are you certain it was a true prophecy?"

"I witnessed it myself," Dumbledore responded. "I too have little faith in divination, but she did not use her accoutrements when making this prediction. It was a classic case of a seer entering a trance, reciting a prophecy, and not remembering it afterward, and its existence was recorded in the hall of prophecy. If you will recall, prophecies are kept by the most ancient and powerful of magics—once I had verified its existence there, I knew it was a true prophecy.

"Now, the existence of the prophecy would not have been a problem if Voldemort had never found out. Unfortunately, a young Death Eater happened to be listening outside the room and heard part of it himself. Of course, he immediately ran to his master to tell him what he had heard, but not having heard the entire foretelling, Voldemort acted in a completely different manner than he would have if he had known the missing pieces."

It was everything Dumbledore had said it was... and worse than Jean-Sebastian had expected. Yet there were still unanswered questions.

"But how did you know of this if the Death Eater immediately went to his master with the information?"

"I knew him," Dumbledore answered simply. "He was young and idealistic and believed—correctly, in my opinion—that there were many things about the wizarding world which needed to be changed. Unfortunately, he chose the wrong engine of change, and has paid the price ever since. Once he had realized the implications of what he had set in motion and understood Voldemort's plans, he came to me immediately and confessed all. Since that time, he has been a double agent—a spy in Voldemort's camp who has remained in that role to this day."

So, a traitor had caused the death of Jean-Sebastian's childhood friend. He already knew of Pettigrew and yearned for the chance to mete out justice to the rat, but this man had set the events in motion. A burning fire lit itself in his heart, and he glared at the Headmaster. "Who was it?"

Shaking his head, Dumbledore directed a level gaze back at his companion. "There is no reason to share that with you and every reason to keep it to myself. For his protection and for the invaluable information he brings to me, especially with Voldemort now returned, I must keep his identity a secret."

Jean-Sebastian peered at Dumbledore, his emotions roiling. "How can you be certain this man is not playing you as well?"

"Because I hold something over him," Dumbledore replied quietly, his eyes flashing in annoyance. "I am many things and have made mistakes, Jean-Sebastian, but do not ever think I am stupid. As soon as the Death Eater came to me, I ensured his compliance and engineered his loyalty—he risks his life on a daily basis and has proven his worth."

Still unhappy with Dumbledore's refusal to divulge the name, Jean-Sebastian nodded his head curtly. "I want to know the moment anything changes," he demanded, to which Dumbledore responded with a nod. "Then what is this prophecy?"

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. ... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

A chill in the air seemed to settle into Jean-Sebastian's very bones as the words of the seer filled the room. The language was certainly that of prophecy, filled with obscure references and predictions which could be understood in many different ways, and Jean-Sebastian could only speculate that it was a true foretelling when Dumbledore's testimony of his origins was examined.

"That is truly a vague prediction," Jean-Sebastian finally stated after some thought.

"Indeed it is. But when it is examined, I think one can gain a clearer picture of what it foretells."

"The first lines are unclear, stating only that the child would be born to those who faced the Dark Lord three times and survived and that he would be born near or at the end of July."

"What about September? It was the seventh month of the Roman calendar."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled in response. "I had considered that. However, due to the fact that September was still several months away and the other requirements could not be fulfilled, I concluded that it must be July. There were two young boys who fit the bill—Harry Potter and one other. And it was only the first two lines that the Death Eater heard that day; otherwise, Voldemort's actions would likely have been completely different.

"It is the third line which proves that the prophecy was made about Harry—when Voldemort attacked the Potters in 1981, he left Harry with a scar which 'marked him as his equal.' He could have attacked the other young boy, but for reasons only Voldemort himself can reveal, he chose to attack the Potters. I can only assume the other boy would have been next had he succeeded."

"And the power the Dark Lord knows not?"

"Unclear," Dumbledore responded. "However, I believe that power to be the power of love. Voldemort never knew love as a young man, and I believe he has no comprehension of its power or the lengths most people will go to in order to protect loved ones. The only witnesses to that night are dead, outside of a small boy who could not possibly remember what happened, much less understand it. In piecing together the events which took place, I postulated that Lily Potter placed a blood-based protection on her son which was sealed by her death, which is why Harry survived the killing curse."

The explanation made a certain amount of sense—there were many old and forgotten magics in the world, and it was very possible that a mother could have used one of the most powerful positive emotions to protect her son.

"So this 'power he knows not' has been used up?"

"Not necessarily," Dumbledore disagreed. "Harry, despite his childhood with the Dursleys, appears to have an amazing capacity



for love. And don't forget the entry of your daughter into the equation—aren't Veela powers largely based on love?"

A chill once again swept through Jean-Sebastian at the Headmaster's words. Had he unknowingly provided Harry with the means of the ultimate defeat of the Dark Lord? And what part did his daughter have to play? Could she have somehow been destined to join with Harry in defeating the Dark Lord? The possibilities boggled the mind, and Jean-Sebastian was momentarily surprised that he had not seen it himself.

"So, you believe the power manifest itself on the night Voldemort was vanquished... and still has some part to play."

"In short, yes. There may be other pieces which must still come into play, but those will have to reveal themselves at the appropriate time."

After a little more thought, Jean-Sebastian thought he understood why the Headmaster had acted the way he had. "And the fact that the prophecy specifically says that one of them must die means it does not refer to the night Harry's parents were murdered."

"Exactly," Dumbledore confirmed. "The term 'vanquish' suggests that once Harry had survived that night when Voldemort was defeated, the prophecy could have been fulfilled. Yet the fourth line says that they are destined to meet and that someday one of them must kill the other. Whatever happened that night, it is certain that Voldemort did not 'die' at Harry's hand—it was his mother's sacrifice, or so I believe, which resulted in his downfall."

"That is a substantial amount of supposition and speculation on which to base your entire strategy."

A shrug met his declaration. "It is, but the Dark Lord's return seems to support the theory. Voldemort had been known to claim that he had gone further down the path to immortality than any other, so I believe he was not truly killed that night. He was certainly disembodied, but he wasn't truly defeated. Harry is the only one who can bring about his demise."

Although wary to take such a nebulous prediction at face value, Jean-Sebastian knew the time to ponder it for himself was not here. Dumbledore's interpretation certainly seemed valid, and for now, it seemed as though the best course of action was to be cautious and act as though it was the literal truth.

"There is still a certain vagueness, but it is certainly plausible."

"Ah, unfortunately, my friend, all prophecy is such," Dumbledore agreed with aplomb. "We can never be sure until after the events have concluded. We can only base our actions on what we believe, and we must adapt as events demand."

"Has Harry been told?" Jean-Sebastian knew his question was blunt, but although he already knew the answer, he wanted to know why this information had been kept from him.

"No, I have not told Harry," Dumbledore responded, and he continued before Jean-Sebastian could make any further comment. "It is a heavy burden for a young man to bear. I believe Harry to be supremely capable and confident, but I do not think he is ready for this."

"When do you mean to tell him, then?"

Dumbledore thought for a few moments before he made any comment. "I had thought to see how he does this year and then tell him by about his sixteenth birthday. Much will depend upon his maturity level and whether I believe he can handle it."

Though he was still not convinced, Jean-Sebastian understood the Headmaster's point. "I have promised not to keep anything from Harry—my daughter was most insistent on this. However, I believe you may be right in this case. But he must be told, Dumbledore, and sooner rather than later."

"I will think on it further."

Jean-Sebastian nodded. "In that case, I think we should talk about my purpose for coming here tonight."

A wave of Dumbledore's hand, and Jean-Sebastian continued. "I would like to know more about this order you have established."

"You wish to join."

Jean-Sebastian shook his head. "Unfortunately, I do not know enough about it yet to determine my actions. If it is what I suspect it is, then I may very well join, but I would like to know more first, attend some meetings, and generally see how you handle things before I make any commitments."

"That would be acceptable," Dumbledore replied with a nod. "I formed the Order to directly combat Voldemort's forces during the first war when it became evident the Ministry was... shall we say, less than effective in dealing with the Dark Lord. We carried out many activities, such as intelligence gathering, combat, and security provision. I have been reforming it for the upcoming conflict and recruiting new members—I do not believe the Ministry will be any more effective now than they were fifteen years ago."

"The next meeting will be held here next Saturday, and you are welcome to attend if you would like."

"I will be here," Jean-Sebastian affirmed. "Of course, as the French Ambassador, I will be limited in what I can do overtly, but if I should choose to join, you may be assured of my full support."

"Of course."

"That brings us to one more item—I have spoken with Harry and believe that some specialized training would be advisable. I don't think that the things he will learn in school will be enough for what he has to face."

"An excellent idea!" Dumbledore approved. "I had planned to start his training this year in any case. I presume you wished to get an early start?"

When Jean-Sebastian confirmed that was his intent, Dumbledore continued. "In that case, might I suggest Alastor Moody as a trainer? I doubt you could find anyone more knowledgeable, especially at such short notice."

Jean-Sebastian did know of the man's reputation. He experienced a moment of concern, knowing that Moody had been impersonated by

the man who had engineered Harry's capture and the return of the Dark Lord during the Tri-Wizard, but that was swiftly quashed. Harry could have no reason to distrust the man himself.

"Auror Moody would be acceptable. Please contact him and see if he is agreeable. If he is, have him contact me and we can set it up."

Their conversation concluded, Jean-Sebastian rose and shook Dumbledore's hand and exited the room. He was now armed with crucial knowledge which would assist him in ensuring Harry's safety and ultimate survival, and he intended to make good use of it.

Although Hermione was happy to see her friend, she could not help but feel tense and unsettled.

It was not that she was not happy for him—that could not be further from the truth. In fact, though Harry had never shared the details of his life with his relatives, she had guessed what his home life had been like. The Delacours appeared to be a godsend for Harry, and she was happy he had found some acceptance and affection from a good and loving family.

No, what had brought Hermione to her current state of disquiet was a part of her she had thought she had left behind years ago.

Simply put, Hermione was afraid and insecure. Part of her was still the timid young girl whose only friends had been the ones she had found in the pages of her favorite books. And though she told herself she was being silly and that Harry had experienced the same lack of friends as she had, she still could not shake the lingering fear she felt at seeing him interact with Fleur and the rest of his friends. Surely Harry would never shunt her aside now that he had a fiancée.

But although she knew in her heart that Harry was not the type to toss her aside on a whim, her head would not listen and she fretted. He seemed so much happier now—his face truly shone when he spoke, he traded banter with the twins, and every time he looked at Fleur it seemed as though they were communing on a different level. How could she—Hermione Jane Bookworm Granger—ever hope to compete with the luminous beauty of Fleur Delacour, Veela goddess and Tri-Wizard champion?

Her world had been centered around him ever since they had entered Hogwarts together—how would she ever cope if he drifted away from her? The trio would cease to exist, and her one other friend would drift away as well. It was Harry who kept the trio together, Harry who bridged the gap between her and Ron. If he was removed from the equation, Hermione had little doubt Ron would initially bask in the chance to win her before quickly losing interest after seeing they had nothing in common. She would be left friendless and alone, as she had been before.

She did not know how long she watched her friends laughing and joking, but her reticence did not go unnoticed for long. Soon, she saw Harry sneaking her curious glances, concern evident on his features. She blushed and tried to hide her anxiety under a veneer of nonchalance, but Harry had been her friend for five years now—he knew her better than almost anyone else and could almost sense her unrest.

He disengaged from his other friends and turned his attention on her, a questioning expression on his face.

"Hermione, are you all right?"

She squirmed and tried to avoid him, but he was there, patience and affection rolling off him in waves. Her heart melted at the sight, and she relaxed slightly, although her head still refused to cooperate.

"I'm fine, Harry," she finally managed in a tremulous voice.

"You don't sound fine to me," Harry countered with a frown. "Now, why don't you tell me what is bothering you?"

Unable to divert him, Hermione blurted the first thing which came into her mind. "You are still my friend, right?"

The full gambit of emotions ran over Harry's face—from disbelief to confusion, through suspicion, and finally to speculative amusement.

"Hermione Jane Granger, what on earth are you blathering on about?"

Then he winked at her and continued in a cheeky tone. "I've wanted to do that for ages! Usually, it's you who uses my full name!"

"Harry James Potter!" Hermione mockingly scolded, causing them both to collapse in laughter.

"Seriously, Hermione," Harry said, once they had both regained their composure, "did you really think this change in my life would change anything between you and I?"

Hermione felt all the embarrassment for ever doubting him, yet within the confines of her own mind, she still felt she was justified for her fears.

"Hermione," Harry interrupted her thoughts. "You do know that you are my best friend, don't you? This is a change in my life, but I would hope that nothing will ever come between us. You've been the one person who has always been there for me. You were there to the end when I faced Quirrel and the stone, provided me with the key to the secret of the basilisk, and then flew with me on Buckbeak in third year. And I can't even describe how valuable your support was last year when even half the members of my own House were angry with me for besmirching Gryffindor's honor by entering the tournament, while the other half congratulated me on circumventing the rules. You were the only one who believed me implicitly and without reservation. Do you have any idea what you mean to me?"

A blushing Hermione nevertheless grabbed her closest friend and give him a massive hug, one which was returned with interest. The relief she felt was indescribable, and she felt tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

Harry, pulling away, noticed her tears and wiped them away with the pads of his thumbs, all the while smiling at her affectionately.

"Now, let's hear no more about this, all right?"

Hermione nodded her head happily, pleased to acquiesce to his request.

At that moment, the door opened, and in walked Dumbledore and Mr. Delacour. Hermione noticed the French Ambassador's curious look in their direction but was too happy to do anything but smile in response.

"Harry, Fleur, it is time to return to the manor," Mr. Delacour stated, addressing his charges.

"Yes, J.S."

"Before we go, would you like to ask your friends if they would like to join you?"

Nodding, Harry turned to his friends. "J.S. is setting up some training for Fleur and me and said it was okay for Ron and Hermione to join me. Would you guys like to?"

Their answers were immediate and fervent, and Hermione beamed in gratitude for his continued support and thoughts about her.

But there was one among the group who was not happy with the development. Ginny gazed longingly at Harry, and although she did not say anything, she appeared hurt that she had not been invited as well. Still uncomfortable with Ginny's continued unwillingness to give him up, Hermione nevertheless empathized with the young girl. She cleared her voice and spoke in a diffident manner.

"Excuse me, Mr. Delacour," she began. "Since we're all in danger, why don't we open up the training group to include others? That way, Harry will always have a group of his friends to support him and defend him if need be, and the rest of us will get advanced training which will help us in the future."

Mr. Delacour peered at her with a half smile forming on his face. "I can see why they call you the smartest witch of your generation, Miss Granger."

Hermione felt her cheeks burn in pleasure at his compliment.

"But I will only acquiesce if you call me J.S., like your friend does."

Smiling happily, Hermione nodded her assent.

Jean-Sebastian turned to Harry. "I'm sure Auror Moody can take on a few more students. The Weasleys may all join, and if there are any others, please let us know, and we will arrange for them to be included."

And it was done—Hermione was pleased with the outcome of the evening. She would continue to be Harry's closest friend and would be involved with his life. Her earlier distress now seemed silly and childish, and when she thought about it, she knew Harry would never have cast her off. Still, it was a relief to be able to settle her fears.

There was another who had witnessed the events of the evening but could not find the same satisfaction in its results. Ron had overheard Hermione's conversation with Harry, and his friends were a little too close for Ron's comfort. After all, Ron was aware of the fact that Harry, as the last Potter, was almost required to take a second wife—the realization had come soon after his friend left the last time, causing his smugness to depart rather precipitously. He was desperate to prevent Hermione from being that second wife. The fact that they were still only fifteen did not penetrate his consciousness—right now, the need to keep them separated was paramount.

In addition, Ron was somewhat offended that Harry had named Hermione as his best friend—that was his title by right! How dare Potter claim such a ridiculous thing?

As indignation and unhappiness swelled within him, Ron thought about Hermione and how he could prevent Harry from making a move on her. He would have to move quickly himself and get to her before Harry could do the same to him. Hermione would be his!



## Chapter 7 – Attack and Counterattack

The Monday after the trial, Harry gathered with his new betrothed and his friends, and waited for the man who would be giving them some training in combat which Harry was certain he would end up needing sooner, rather than later.

Their group had expanded more than Harry and Fleur had expected. Looking around the room, Harry considered each one of his companions and thought about his relationship with them and their reasons for being there. Hermione and Ron were obvious of course, their friendship forged through four years of almost constant companionship. Though Harry's relationship with Ron had been strained by his friend's actions at the outset of the Triwizard Tournament, he knew Ron would be there when it most counted. Ron was a little flaky at times, but he was loyal. Hermione was not even a question—in one way or another, he had been the center of her world—and he of hers—since they had met on the train. She would never be left out where he was involved.

Fleur was, of course, a given in this endeavor. Not only was she now his intended, but in the few days in which they had had to become better acquainted, he had come to know her as a fierce defender of those who she considered family—clearly, Harry now fit into that group. It was humbling and overwhelming to be considered part of a real family—something he had never had before—but Harry was grateful for her caring and concern.

Likewise, Ginny's motivations were no secret—or at least they were not now that Hermione had explained her actions. What surprised Harry about Ginny was the change that appeared to have come over her since they had met again only two days prior. Upon arriving at the ambassador's manor, Ginny had visibly screwed up her courage and approached him, greeting him with none of the embarrassment and shyness he had expected from her in the past. The annoying squeak was gone, and for that Harry could only be pleased—he hoped to get to know her better, as he suspected she could turn out to be a close friend.

The twins lounged in the corner of the room, speaking quietly with one another, no doubt planning their pranks for the coming year. Not only were they fun to hang out with, but Harry also trusted them—at least he trusted them to have his back when it mattered. In the

matter of their pranking, no one was safe from their attentions, but at least Harry knew none of their jokes were meant in a malicious manner. Their presence was also a given, as they had always supported him.

The difficult ones to place were the last two in the room. Neville Longbottom stood speaking with Hermione in quiet tones, his manner as shy and self-effacing as ever, as had been his appearance that morning. Hermione had suggested including him, and with Harry's agreement she made the overture. Harry had been surprised when Neville agreed. While he had not yet had a chance to talk to Neville, he knew the boy considered himself to be a failure—his confidence could only be helped by this undertaking, and Harry figured that was at least part of the reason for his presence.

Finally, his eyes rested upon the final member of their little group—Luna Lovegood. Not knowing her in the slightest, Harry was uncertain as to her presence. He understood that she was a childhood friend of Ginny's—who had invited her to become a member of the little group—but beyond that, his contact with her had been limited to a few words of greeting spoken that very morning. She was sitting by herself, a slight smile on her face while she looked off into the distance at something which only she could see. Hermione told him she was very intelligent, but her ways were somewhat fanciful and odd. Deciding to reserve judgment for himself, Harry had greeted her in a friendly manner, which she had returned with a like sentiment.

Together, Harry was hoping they would make a potent force in the fight against Voldemort. They were all, he suspected—with the exception of Neville, who could not seem to get anything right, and Luna, who he did not know anything about—among the most powerful of their age group, something which would only continue to develop as they matured.

After a few minutes of waiting, the sound of the professor's approach—the characteristic thud-stomp of his gait—was heard through the door, and the man entered, his eye rotating wildly, presumably searching for enemies. He stopped inside the door and regarded the assembled youths with an unreadable expression.

"So you're the recruits I'm to be saddled with," he ground out grumpily.

From behind him, Jean-Sebastian slipped into the room, a wry smile on his face as he watched the showdown between teacher and students. He took a seat in a chair at the back of the room and settled in to watch.

"All right then, let's all get in a line side to side, facing me," Moody barked out, turning his back to close the door, clearly expecting his orders to be followed.

A few moments later, the young students were arranged to his liking, he turned back to them with an unreadable expression. The man stumped around the room inspecting his charges for several moments, correcting posture where he found it lacking, admonishing the lack of care of a wand, or an expression lacking the appropriate gravity—the Weasley twins, specifically, were reprovved for their irrepressible humor and lightheartedness.

At length he trudged back to the front of the group and once again observed them with a critical eye.

"First, you will all understand that this is no lark," he snapped, peering at each of them in turn. "Anyone who does not treat this with the appropriate level of seriousness will be asked to leave—no exceptions."

He began stumping in front of Harry and his friends, his eyes still affixed upon them as he passed each one. "Death Eaters are deadly serious, and they depend upon fear and brute force to instill fear in their enemies, and possess the power and the will to use their knowledge for the support of their master. In short, they will kill—and have killed—without a second thought. And killing is not even the worst of their crimes. You are all targets, either by circumstance, your family's political and social beliefs, or by the simple matter of your birth.

"I am here to try to give you the basics in learning how to defend yourselves, not only with the use of curses and hexes, but also in employing various stratagems, learning to outthink your opponents, and above all, knowing when to fight and when to retreat. The last might be the most important thing you will learn. You must never be

too proud to admit you are overmatched—living to fight another day must always be your goal in any engagement, as dying in an untenable situation will not help anyone."

Moody was now walking behind them, but the trainees kept their eyes forward. Moody's manner, his words and way of instructing them reminded Harry of certain old war movies he had chanced to see glimpses of in his uncle's house. Vernon had considered himself to be somewhat of a connoisseur of old war movies and had watched them frequently.

"Now, I do not have the time to teach you everything," Moody continued. "In two weeks you will return to Hogwarts, where I will not be a professor this year. Regardless, as I have other tasks which require my attention, I would not be available to hold your hands. I will try to give you some measure of my experience so that when you leave here, you will be better prepared.

He completed the circle and stopped in front of them, facing the students once more, his face as impassive as when he had entered the room.

"Ground rules! I expect each of you to obey my commands immediately and with no question. I also expect that each of you will give your best effort—if you do not, there is no point in your being here. Finally, I expect you all to practice constant vigilance—there is no way of knowing if someone is a Death Eater unless you are able to check their arm. And the friend you think you know may not even be that, as there are other ways for an enemy to get close to you. Simple Polyjuice potion can be used against you, not to mention the Imperius curse which will turn your friends into your enemies. Practicing watchfulness, and spotting things which are not as they appear, may save your life one day."

He scanned them once again, before his eye alighted on Harry. "Mr. Potter!" he boomed, startling Harry to stand up straighter. "I believe you have seen the Unforgivable Curses in action. What is the best defense against an Unforgivable?"

Harry considered the question for a moment. "I would say it is best not to be caught in the curse's path."

A smile, almost like a grimace, came over Moody's face. "A very good defense indeed. Listen to Mr. Potter's answer—no shield will work against the Unforgivable Curses, and you had better not be there when one is cast at you.

"Other than that, the only way to defend against them is the use of the summoning charm to intercept the beam—which can be a tricky piece of timing, I can tell you—or the use of battle transfiguration for the same purpose. We will cover both of these defenses, and although I do not expect any of you to master them for some time, I do expect you to give your best effort and learn the basics, which you will then practice.

"We will also be covering the art of dueling and you will learn some of the basic concepts which duelists will use to get a leg up on their opponents. However, you must remember that while dueling is a very important foundation upon which to build, it will not get you through a life and death struggle in a true combat situation. The art of dueling has a set of rules by which each duelist must abide—of course, a true fight does not have any rules, nor could you expect a Death Eater to abide by any such rules if they did exist.

"A fight with a Death Eater will generally be short and dirty, with each of you using every trick you can think of to get the better of the other. Clear your thoughts of long drawn out struggles between two titans which fill literature, as they have no place in the real world. I will teach you how to duel first and then I will teach you how to fight. There are some tricks you can learn which will help you to gain the upper hand, and I'm certain that some of the other adults will have some valuable things to teach you in addition. Learn everything you can—you never know when a piece of insignificant knowledge will save your life."

He once again paused and gazed at each of the youths in turn. "Again, you will not be able to master these techniques in the brief time we have available, but by the time you return to Hogwarts, you will at least have a foundation in these subjects, and I will give you further exercises for you to use while you are at school to hone your skills. Assuming you all do well, we will continue these sessions next summer.

"Now, does everyone understand?"

"Yes, sir," the group intoned.

They started with some simple stances, the professor teaching them how best to position themselves and to move, stating that good balance was key to being able to not only fight, but also to defend oneself. From the balancing instruction, they moved to various exercises which would help them shift from stance to stance, as well as to dodge, roll, and otherwise ensure that they could move about during a combat situation in the most efficient manner, while retaining their ability to respond to attacks. And though there were some grumbles from the assembled students of how they wanted to get to the dueling and fighting, Moody was firm, telling them repeatedly that they needed to learn to walk before they could even think about running.

What struck Harry throughout the course of the day was the man himself. He was fair but strict, exacting a high level of commitment from his charges, while putting his all into teaching them what he felt they needed to know. He was clearly knowledgeable, if his years as a top Auror had not already convinced them of his fitness, and the manner in which he taught them was concise and exact, yet his words and demonstrations were designed to be quickly understood and acted upon. When questioned, he told them that the methods he was teaching them were quite similar to what trainee Aurors were taught, modified slightly to account for their younger years and incomplete education. He was effusive with his praise, especially toward Harry, who he almost seemed to consider a prodigy who was his personal responsibility. Harry returned the favor by giving his all, picking up the exercises with ease and helping to instruct the others where required. DADA had always been Harry's favorite class—he was enjoying himself immensely.

But what surprised Harry the most, was the sense of familiarity he had with the professor. In fact, if Harry had not known that the Professor Moody he remembered from his fourth year Defense Against the Dark Arts class was an imposter, he would never have believed that they were not the same person. Whatever Barty Crouch Jr. was, a poor actor was not one of them. The man should have been presented an Academy Award, based on the minute details of the grizzled Auror which he had acted out so flawlessly.

There was one memorable event which occurred during the course of the day. Moody had just asked them to do some basic spell

casting using the stances he had just taught them, when he pulled up short at the sight of Neville struggling to cast a simple spell through his wand.

"Mr. Longbottom! What appears to be the matter?"

Neville blushed and stammered that everything was fine, but that did not placate the observant Auror.

"Do not try to cover up your struggles, son," Moody admonished. "You appear to be trying to force your spell through your wand, when your magic should be working in tandem with the wand to produce the desired effect. Where did you get that wand?"

"From my G-Grandmother," Neville stammered. "It was my father's."

Moody's remaining eye widened at Neville's admission and he inspected the wand carefully.

"I knew your parents, Mr. Longbottom," he said quietly, "the same as I knew Mr. Potter's." He nodded in Harry's direction. "Good people, excellent Aurors, they were. I was privileged to serve with them."

"Unfortunately, it appears to me that your wand does not match you, which makes casting anything very difficult. I recommend you visit Mr. Ollivander's shop and purchase a new wand which will match you more closely. If you don't, you will have trouble casting even the simplest magic for the rest of your life."

Neville appeared flabbergasted. "Really? But Gran... I thought I could use my father's wand because of our close relationship."

Moody shook his head and clasped Neville around the shoulders. "While it is true that children often have somewhat of an affinity for their parents' wands, we are all different and there is no guarantee. You go today after we are finished here and get a new wand. Tell your grandmother that I insisted. I don't think she will be upset—you will always have a piece of your father with you, as long as you possess his wand."

Thanking him, Neville moved away to continue his exercises, while appearing deep in thought. Harry was glad for his friend—while he could understand wishing to keep something of his parents' close to

him, Mr. Ollivander's words from his visit still echoed through his mind. "The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Potter." Hopefully, Neville would improve once he had his new wand.

The day ended with another pep talk from the professor, and they all separated to go their separate ways. In Harry's mind he felt as though he was finally beginning to obtain the skills he would require to take on Voldemort. It was a welcome feeling.

"I hereby call this session of the Wizengamot of Britain to order!"

Albus Dumbledore surveyed the Wizengamot chambers, thinking, with some distraction, that this was the first meeting of the English legislative body since Harry's trial the previous week. There would undoubtedly be some fireworks—especially a certain piece of legislation which he had found through his contacts would be presented. He was not disappointed.

The meeting started much the same as any other, with talks of the state of country, any news as to the activities of known Death Eaters (Fudge's denial of the Dark Lord's return making the topic of Voldemort specifically taboo), budgets—including a call for the Ministry to increase the Auror budget, which Dumbledore had proposed himself—and the other unexciting, yet necessary minutia which characterized any other meeting of the august body.

The arrival of the legislative portion of the meeting signaled the true beginning of the true battle scheduled for that day. When the Ministry propositions had been dealt with, Dumbledore opened the floor to private member's bills, and, as expected, the unsightly, pink cardigan clad figure of the Minister's lackey, stood and cleared her voice with her customary, "Hem, hem."

"Honored members," she began in her shrill voice, "I stand before you today outraged as one of our long-established institutions is under attack from forces which would see it tarnished and reduced to a shadow of its former glory."

A murmur welled up in the chamber at the woman's audacious and inflammatory words, and Dumbledore sat back and listened with a half smile on his face. This was politics at its finest (so to speak); impassioned speeches, outrage, and the playing upon the emotions,



traditions, and solidarity of the body in order to accomplish a purpose.

Regardless, Dumbledore thought with a sardonic smile, Umbridge was a duffer in the political arena and her words—while she was doing a credible job of liberally sprinkling her speech with provocative statements—were not as affective as they would have been had they been delivered by a true orator. Umbridge—and by extension Fudge, and Dumbledore assumed his financial backer Malfoy—would lose the vote here today, and would have even if Dumbledore had not held an ace up his sleeve.

"While perhaps some of you may not be aware of the threat to our way of life, I am certain all will be incensed by what I have to say here today. Our beloved national education institution of Hogwarts, which many of you here today attended in your youths, is on the brink of accepting those who should truly be kept away from its hallowed halls.

"Case in point, I direct you to our esteemed Headmaster, who also leads this body, and question some of the decisions he has made with regard to who is allowed to attend our beloved institution. In fact, we all know of the dark creature he allowed to teach our children, and we know that that same dark creature was allowed to attend Hogwarts many years ago as a student. How can he justify this travesty?"

She sneered at Dumbledore, the curl of her lip completely incongruous with the lurid pink of her robes and the nasally whine of her voice. Dumbledore almost laughed aloud at the spectacle she was making of herself and wondered why Fudge would saddle himself with her—likely because she was the only one he could induce to take him seriously.

A quick glance at the Minister revealed his attention on the pink-clad woman, but his face betrayed no emotion as he listened to her words. Dumbledore knew Fudge was a willing conspirator in this attempt, but that concept had been the Undersecretary's. The Minister himself, however, wished to keep himself aloof and maintain the fiction he stood for the people, rather than the highest bidder, which was why he had left it to her.

"In response to this grievous threat, I have come before this body today with a proposal to bar those unfit from attending our beloved institution, or any of our other schools in Britain." The woman's eyes fairly glowed with her fanatical devotion and self-righteous indignation, and she cast her eyes about the chamber, her gaze almost seeming to imperiously demand the cooperation of the Wizengamot. "The copies of the proposed law are being distributed by the clerks. In considering this proposed legislation, I would ask each of you to truly consider what is best for our land, and whether we wish to educate those creatures who mean us harm so they may further perpetrate their nefarious deeds against us all. I thank you for your time, and ask for your support and your honorable attention in this matter."

The member sat down and Dumbledore, once he had received the parchment detailing the Undersecretary's proposition, glanced down the sheet, taking in the details of her foolhardy plan. It was similar to other documents he had seen over the years, rife with pureblood dogma and full of defamatory and incendiary statements. In short, it was nothing less than he would have expected from such a short-sighted woman.

After a few moments had passed, Dumbledore set the parchment down on the desk in front of him, and steepled his fingers in front of him as he considered the matter at hand. The Wizengamot was a conservative body, it was true, but it was not necessarily a forum for blood purists and bigots. Like any other organization, it had its share of factions ranging from the true Pureblood fanatics, right down through the spectrum to the moderates who knew there was no basis to Voldemort's dogma. In fact, the truly fanatical members were very small in number, and those who sympathized with their beliefs, although not overt followers of the dark lord, were only slightly more numerous. Like most groups of intelligent beings gathered together, the majority of those in the group were intelligent, honest, and reasonable, with only a few zealots who sometimes gave the entire group a poor reputation.

Which was why Dumbledore was somewhat puzzled with Fudge's move. Even without the threat of Harry leaving Britain to attend Beauxbatons, there was little chance of this bill ever being passed. Dumbledore fancied that he had more than enough support to overrule Umbridge's bill with little to no trouble. What could Fudge mean by it? Was this a prelude to something else, or was the

minister so ineffectual that he actually thought he would pass this tripe just because he wished it?

It was a problem for another time, perhaps—the rustling of parchment had largely ceased, and more than one member was now looking to him to initiate the debate.

"Thank you, Madam Umbridge," Dumbledore said, rising to his feet. "A proposal for a new law has been put before the Wizengamot. I now invite discussion on the bill before we put it to a vote."

There were a few murmurs as the members discussed the issue amongst themselves. A man stood on the far end of the chambers, motioning that he would like to speak. Dumbledore bowed affably and recognized him. "Jonas Strong has the floor."

The man bowed in response before directing his gaze across the chamber. Strong was a tall, handsome man in his middle years, and though he was normally an intelligent and somewhat moderate sort of man, he had a disturbing tendency to vote with the Pureblood block on seemingly random occasions.

"Thank you, Chief Warlock. Before we get into discussion of this... bill Madam Umbridge has put before us, I wish to discuss this issue she raised of a werewolf who attended Hogwarts. I must say that I—and many of my colleagues—were surprised to find that not only had such a dark creature attended the institution, but also that he was hired to teach one of the core courses. I would like to ask the Headmaster to account for this."

Smiling, Dumbledore rose and stood before the chamber. "I might remind Member Strong, that though werewolves are technically deemed to be dark creatures, they are only truly dangerous on one night in a lunar month, unless they are known to be an insane criminal such as Fenrir Greyback. The student in question was never a danger to the student population—he was sequestered during his night every month. Besides, as per the Hogwarts charter, I have no authority to deny anyone an education who wishes it—as I told our esteemed Minister only days ago," he nodded at Fudge, who had allowed a slight frown to come over his face, "the charter is very clear on this matter."

Dumbledore glanced around the room, seeing the nods of agreement on the faces of many. This was the true measure of a politician, and Dumbledore was, at heart, a political animal. "As for the professor, the same precautions were taken during his tenure. You are all well aware of the difficulty in finding suitable professors for the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts, and having to find a replacement every year is difficult and taxing. In addition, I believe that if you were to ask the students, the majority of them would declare that the professor in question was the best teacher I have been able to find for the post in several years. If not for the outcry against his being employed at Hogwarts, I would still have him as a professor, I assure you."

Strong said nothing in response—he merely nodded and sat, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"This is all very interesting," Madam Longbottom interrupted, "but I believe we had best focus on the present, rather than discussing the past."

The Longbottoms—truly ambassadors for the light, and had been for several centuries. The current matriarch was a tough, no nonsense woman, who had stood for her family for more than thirty years since the death of her late husband. A more formidable political foe was difficult to find, though her choice of headwear was somewhat suspect...

"Your proposal, Madam Umbridge, is very... interesting." The Undersecretary's face darkened at the contemptuous way in which Lady Longbottom expressed her opinion of the bill. "But, in essence, I believe that this bill is a measure to prevent those undesirables from attending any of our educational institutions, am I correct?"

Umbridge nodded, a pleasant—and patently insincere—expression plastered upon her face.

"In that case, Undersecretary, I wonder at the wording of your proposal. In particular, you use the word 'creature' several times over in this document. However, I would like to know who would determine the definition of the word, in light of the many disparate peoples with whom we come in daily contact."

"I second Madam Longbottom's question," Dumbledore interrupted. "For example, does creature refer to any who are not human? And if so, what about those who are of mixed blood? There are those who are part goblin, giant, and some who have fairy blood, among others. How do they fall into this definition of yours?"

"An important question to be sure," Umbridge simpered. "We shall designate a committee to study the matter and come to a determination as to the precise definition."

"A committee designated by you?" Amelia Bones snapped.

"The Minister is responsible for enacting the laws passed by this body into law. He shall set up the commission to determine the exact standards of those we allow into our school system."

"Do you not think it dangerous to pass a law which does not clearly define its own aims, Madam Umbridge?" asked Lady Longbottom. "It seems to me that if you wish to deprive certain beings access to various benefits of society, that you had best classify exactly what—and whom—is being denied."

"Exactly!" another voice spoke up. Porter Friesinger was a moderate whose family had come to Britain some centuries early from Germany, and were also rumored to claim fairy blood in their past, though the family was largely Pureblood from the time they emigrated. "I should not like to vote for a law which would prevent my own family from gaining an education."

"Mr. Friesinger, I am certain we can come to some accommodation and make an exception for... certain members of good standing, whose loyalty and pedigree are well known." Umbridge's simpering voice was even more grating in her obviously rising annoyance. Moreover, it was clear in the instant that she finished her statement, that she had made an error of judgment. In order to carry the day, she would have to convince those moderate members who had certain elitist tendencies. However, this selective ban that she now appeared to be proposing was now clearly exposed for the intolerance it espoused.

"You cannot have it both ways," Lady Longbottom ground out, her disapproval clear in the censure of her words. "You propose to disallow all 'creatures' from attending due to the danger of educating

them, and now you propose that there can be exceptions. Are there exceptions to the safety of our children? Are there those who are creatures that mean us harm, yet are will eligible to be educated? Really, Madam Umbridge, you appear to have given this little thought. Perhaps you should go away and redraft your proposal—if you were to bar all truly dangerous creatures, such as vampires or giants from Hogwarts, it may be something I could support. Of course, as we have never had such creatures attempt to infiltrate our education system in the past, your bill appears to be worth less than the parchment upon which it is printed. I would ask you to avoid wasting the Wizengamot's time."

The mottled red of Umbridge's face indicated the complete loss of her patience, but Dumbledore, deciding that it was time to end this farce of a proposal, cut in before she could reply.

"Come, Madam Umbridge, let us be honest with one another, don't you think?" he said, keeping a careful eye on her reaction to his words, along with the reaction of her superior. "I hardly think there is anyone in this chamber who does not understand the reason for your reticence in defining your words. Your strategy to get your law passed and then leave the rest up to the Minister to further define your target group... or the particular person you target, is that not correct?"

"I have no idea what of you are speaking," the Undersecretary snapped.

"On the contrary, Madam, I believe you understand me perfectly," was Dumbledore's steely response. He glared at her for several moments before she was forced to look away. He smiled grimly in response.

"Your proposal is meaningless—the friendlier races, such as goblins and centaurs, contemptuous of us and our brand of magic, while the darker groups have no interest in being educated by us, and would not fit into our society in any case.

"And as for those others who I have no doubt you would brand as 'creatures,' lycanthropy is a well-documented disease which does not take away the humanity of a person. And as for Veela..."

No one in the room missed Dumbledore's emphasis, least of all Umbridge. "Yes, I know what the thrust of this... this travesty is," Dumbledore snapped, waving the parchment in the air before crushing it in his fist. All trace of the grandfatherly persona he often projected now gone in favor of making an impression upon this stupid woman of just how formidable he could be when provoked.

"Make no mistake, esteemed members," he continued, addressing the entire chamber. "If this bill passes and Miss Delacour is not allowed to attend Hogwarts with her betrothed, then Mr. Potter may very well decide that he has had enough of us. I have heard from my French counterpart, and Madame Maxine has assured me that Harry Potter will be welcome at Beauxbatons any time he chooses. If you wish to be the means of forcing one of this nation's greatest heroes away from our shores, then I suggest you support this bill. If you are a right-thinking, rational person, then the choice is clear—Madam Umbridge's proposal is defamatory and discriminatory. It must be defeated.

"Now, I call for a vote on the member's private bill."

"Seconded!" exclaimed Amelia Bones.

Needless to say, the members of the Wizengamot, unwilling to appear to the Wizarding public as though they had driven Harry Potter from Britain, were cowed by Dumbledore's words. The motion was defeated soundly.

Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic of Magical Britain, sat behind his desk, at once amused and annoyed by the spectacle he was witnessing. The meeting of the Wizengamot had concluded over an hour earlier, and while his senior Undersecretary had arrived almost ten minutes previous, she had not stopped her ranting and raving the entire time she had been in his office. Even now she paced in front of his desk, her screeching grating on his nerves, the way she threw her hands up in the air to punctuate her words, making him concerned her gyrations would cause her to suddenly take flight.

Such an absurd thought to have at such a time—he shook his head and smiled at the incongruousness of the thought paired with the situation. On the other hand, it was difficult in not having thoughts about such an absurd woman. Unfortunately, his smile had not gone unnoticed by his companion.

"...and I cannot countenance such effrontery, such disregard for the standing and honor of those of us—"

Umbridge stopped and rounded on the Minister, her chubby face turning red in her anger. "Minister!" she demanded in her typical shrill voice, which was rendered even higher by her agitated state. "How can you smile at a time like this? These... beasts are threatening our society, our way of life, and our very existence as a noble social order which must be the envy of all the world. Can you countenance this even for a moment?"

"Madam Undersecretary, I am certain you are well within your rights to be outraged by the defeat of your proposition in the Wizengamot." Actually, Fudge, not having much more than a rudimentary loyalty to anything other than his wallet, was indifferent to her schemes. What mattered was his ability to stay in power, and unless she went along with his plans, her ability to continue to forward her own agenda would also be seriously compromised—even the most fervent Pureblood fanatic, unlikely as it was that such a person could actually be elected to be the next Minister, would have a difficult time putting up with her. "However, you must consider the fact that it was by no means certain that your motion would pass, and given the state of the Wizengamot with Mr. Potter's acquittal last week, I dare say your defeat was inevitable."

Eyes narrowed, the Undersecretary stared at him with suspicion and indignation. "Do you mean to tell me that you expected my motion to be defeated?" she demanded, indignation evident in her tone.

Apparently the expression on his face told her everything she needed to know, as her expression became flinty and she sniffed at him in disdain. "In that case, Minister, I wonder why you allowed me to make a fool of myself before the Wizengamot and even encouraged me to do so."

You need no encouragement from anyone to make yourself into the fool, Fudge thought to himself.

Out loud he merely gestured her to a chair and leaned back in his, considering the proper response that would maintain her loyalty, while allowing him to continue to employ her as his own personal



attack dog to be pointed directly at Dumbledore and his annoying little lackey.

"Madam Umbridge, I am most surprised at you," he finally said with a hint of reproof in his voice. "I should have thought that a woman of your political acumen would have read the situation and understood the thrust of my allowing you to present your legislation."

Her eyes softened at the flattery, even while she appeared to become more thoughtful. In truth, the woman had no political acumen whatsoever, and was merely guided by her prejudices and wishes for a society in which her definition of what was right and proper was allowed to rule over the rest.

"I can only assume that you misread what I had seen due to your righteous indignation," Fudge continued, taking great care to appeal to her vanity. "The situation in the Wizengamot was such that a motion which would even appear to be even remotely detrimental to young Harry Potter had no chance at success. If you had perhaps been able to phrase your proposal in language which was a little more... reasonable, there may have been a slight chance it its being carried, but the likelihood—now that Potter has been exonerated and publicly linked to the Veela—of it being passed was never great.

"In short, I allowed you to proceed as a distraction to Dumbledore. He and I are engaged in a power struggle for control of our government, as you well know, and if he were to be able to best me, I shudder to think what would happen to the society we all love. We would be overrun with Mudbloods and those of less than human ancestry, no doubt."

The woman was silent for several moments, though here glare did not lessen. "So you allowed me to be a... diversion!" she spat at length.

"I allowed you to create a diversion," Fudge replied with aplomb. "You are not the diversion, but your proposal was. Dumbledore must now watch and be afraid of a modified version of your proposal being slipped past him, which will take his attention from other matters, including your coming installment at Hogwarts. You have not forgotten that have you?"

"I have not," she responded slowly.

Fudge knew he had her—she had been basking in the fact that he had entrusted her with such an important design ever since he had first informed her of it.

"Good," Fudge said, allowing his approval to be conveyed by his voice. She truly was a useful tool in that she was manic in attacking whatever he pointed her at, and he could disavow her actions if she went too far, as she was well known to be a fanatic. Hopefully, in this instance she would be able to curb her natural tendencies and accomplish the complete takeover of the school.

"Always keep the goal in sight, Madam," he admonished. "Removing Hogwarts from the Headmaster's control is the first step in our plan to neuter him. Once we can prove he is unfit for that role, it will be easier to unseat him from the Wizengamot and completely marginalize him. And without Dumbledore's support, Harry Potter will be completely without any power. Then with Dumbledore out of the way and Potter shunted to the side, we will be able to claim the moral high ground, quash any hint of this ludicrous story of the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and proceed with building our society into one which will be the envy of the world.

"But in order to achieve this goal, I will need to you adhere to the plan and gradually take over control of the school. Remove Dumbledore from his seat of power, Madam, then we will have the upper hand."

Umbridge's smile became truly unpleasant—Fudge thought she may have intended it to be predatory, but he could not imagine any short, plump predators clad entirely in pink. It was a most disturbing sight, and one which would undoubtedly take an excess of brandy to remove from his consciousness.

After another day of training with the demanding and critical Alastor Moody, Ron Weasley stumbled from the Floo, ignoring his brothers and sister who followed him, and trudged up the stairs to his room in the Burrow, thankful that another day had come to a close. It seemed that every part of him ached, and he was certain he had never worked this hard before in his life. Moody was trying to kill them—of that, he was convinced.

Still, though Ron was perhaps not the most motivated or studious sort of person, still the training and the things he had learned filled him with a... pride, for want of a better term—pride in what he was doing. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had returned, after all, and his best friend was still the number one target. Ron would not sit back on the sidelines while Harry was threatened—he would stand and fight.

On the other front... The thought of Hermione brought a grimace to his face. He had not wavered for an instant in his determination to woo his brainy friend, and he was quickly coming to realize that Hermione was not the plain young woman he had always thought her to be—she was growing and filling in nicely, and was now a girl who he thought would command considerable attention as she continued to mature. Much as he regretted it, he knew that previously, his desire to be with her was something of a desire not to lose to Harry again, but now that had changed—she was perhaps not the statuesque beauty he had always noticed in the past, but she was attractive in her own right. The fact that they fought constantly...

That, he firmly pushed from his mind. Their arguing had the earmarks of an old married couple's relationship—everyone said so. It was logical to assume—as his desired girlfriend was so fond of stating—that their relationship was ready to move to the more official one which he desired. If only it were that easy...

He was trying—he certainly was. He had attempted to tone down their disagreements, he tried to speak of her favorite things, and he endeavored to show her that he really cared. It did not seem to be working. She acted suspiciously around him, almost as though she thought he was trying to put one over on her, and moreover, his attempts to appear interested in the things which were important to her, she seemed to see through with ease. If only she were interested in the things he was—he could talk about Quidditch and chess forever!

The door to his room banged open, and Ron sat up in surprise, as his two elder brothers entered the room.

"Hello Ronnikins, fancy meeting you here!" exclaimed one twin.

"It's a surprise to see our brother in his own room, Gred?"

"No, perhaps not, Forge. It just seemed like a good way to open the conversation."

The other twin nodded sagely. Ron, however, was not in the mood to deal with his ever exuberant brothers.

"Do you two have a reason for bugging me?"

The twins shared a smirk. "Was that a hint of surliness I heard from our ungrateful brother?"

"I believe it was," replied the other. "And it's particularly rude of him, considering the fact that we came to help him, don't you think?"

"I concur, brother."

"Help me what?" Ron demanded.

"Well, Ron, it appears your attempts to woo the lovely Miss Granger have run into an impasse."

Ron attempted to react nonchalantly. "What are you guys talking about?"

Fred raised an eyebrow. "It appears that little Ronnie is trying to play stupid."

"An easy endeavor, to be sure."

Though Ron's anger was about to explode, George moved quickly to prevent him from erupting. "Ron, don't ever think that we're blind. The only one you are not fooling with your little puppy dog devotion is Moody, and I doubt he can tear his attention away from his paranoid delusions long enough to see your romantic fumbblings."

"But have no fear, George and I have come to your rescue."

Though Ron was suspicious and angry at his brothers' teasing, he was desperate enough to grasp at just about anything. "What do you mean?"

The soft sound of something hitting his bed brought Ron's attention away from his brothers. A book? What good would that do?

"That book, Ronnie, is the ticket to your successful wooing of your lovely lady."

"Read the cover, Ron."

Looking down, Ron noted the wizarding illustration of a young woman holding the hand of a young man as they walked along a street, a look of utter devotion on her face. They were surrounded by delicate flowers and vines, which weaved and intertwined with each other, no doubt a subtle example of what was happening with the couple in the picture. The title of the book was emblazoned upon the top in lurid red letters, Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches.

Ron glanced back up at his brothers to see them smirking at him. "Just read the book, Ron. It tells you how you can mold yourself into boyfriend material."

"No guarantee that she will go out with you, but at least you'll have a fighting chance."

They smiled, identical evil grins, before they turned as one and left the room, leaving Ron alone with the book. Curiously, Ron opened it and began leafing through its pages. The irony of using a book to gain Hermione's affections was not lost on Ron, but as desperate as he was, he was willing to resort to just about anything. Hopefully, she would see he was serious about connecting with her.

"I know you are indignant about this, Jean-Sebastian, but I believe there is no response to make at this time."

Jean-Sebastian stopped his pacing and glared at Dumbledore. "A member of your government just attempted to brand my daughters as creatures, and all you can say is that I should let the insult slide? At the very least I should be giving your Minister a stinging set-down, if not pulling Fleur—and Harry—from Hogwarts immediately."

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "I understand your need to protect your daughter. However, I believe it would be absolutely pointless to protest directly to the Minister. It would only give him possible ammunition to demand that you are removed from your post."

"As though my Minister would listen to him," Jean-Sebastian replied with a derisive snort. "Alain's opinion of Fudge is perhaps worse than my own."

"That may be," Dumbledore agreed pleasantly. "However, the situation has been dealt with. Even if I did not remind the Wizengamot of the consequences of barring your daughter from Hogwarts, I do not think that Fudge had anywhere close to the number of necessary votes to pass the law. No, this was nothing more than a diversionary tactic, and a rather obvious one at that."

Jean-Sebastian did not like what Dumbledore was suggesting, but he was conscious of the fact that nothing could be gained by storming into the British Minister's office and threatening him within an inch of his life. Much as he would like to do exactly that...

Flinging himself into a chair, Jean-Sebastian considered his companion, even as he worked to calm his overwrought emotions.

"What do you suggest then?"

A shrug was his response, prompting Jean-Sebastian to narrow his eyes.

"You do not need to take make that face, Jean-Sebastian," Dumbledore said with a chuckle. "At this point, we can do nothing but wait for Fudge to make his move. I do not doubt that it will be something aimed at discrediting me—you and your family enjoy diplomatic immunity, after all, and I do not think he will be foolish enough to attack you directly."

The man was right—much though Jean-Sebastian wished he was not. But that did not change the fact that he would not allow the man to persecute his family, a family which now included Harry.

"I will not allow your government to target my family, Dumbledore—officially or unofficially. If Fudge attempts to make it difficult for Fleur, I will leave the country and not look back."

"I understand," Dumbledore affirmed. "However, I would ask you to trust us. My staff and I will ensure Fleur's safety and wellbeing at

Hogwarts, and I will be vigilant in the Wizengamot, though I doubt that Fudge will try again so soon."

It was the best he was going to get at the moment, Jean-Sebastian reflected. He knew what he was getting into when he agreed to Sirius' plan to help Harry, and he had no choice but to ride out the storm. It did not change the fact that he had not expected such open opposition from the Minister himself. Perhaps the Minister was something they need to change...

"I will leave it in your hands, Dumbledore," he finally responded. "But I think it is high time we speak of your Minister. He has done nothing about Voldemort's return and I believe we should begin planning for his ultimate removal."

"I agree. It will become the main focus of the Order, along with the ongoing effort against Voldemort."

The two men spoke deep into the night, speaking, planning, discarding, and ultimately agreeing on nothing, but both feeling that they had begun to approach a method for accomplishing their goal. Jean-Sebastian was still concerned about his children, but he knew that they would be protected at Hogwarts. He would need to do his part, from attempting to convince the English government to take the threat of Voldemort seriously, to acting as a liaison to his own government. He did not for a moment believe that the Voldemort problem was merely a British one.

## Chapter 8 – A Course is Set

It was with a high level of excitement that Harry stepped into the Floo Connection to return to Grimmauld Place that Saturday for his first official meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.

The meeting of the Order which had occurred when he had previously stayed at Grimmauld had allowed him a glimpse of the Order's goals, and of course the twins' extendable ears had allowed them to eavesdrop a certain extent. But now he was to be considered a part of the Order—or, at least, a prospective part. For a young man such as Harry, who had grown up in a miserable environment, it was a large step—and a particularly welcome one. He had never had the opportunity to determine the direction in which he wished his life to proceed, and though he supposed young people normally did as their parents directed, at least most of them would have had a little more autonomy than he had ever enjoyed.

The thought of his new betrothal was an example of his discontent and inability to choose the course of his own life. He understood Sirius' reasons, and he understood the way these things often worked in the extremely old-fashioned society in which the wizarding world existed. It still did not make it any easier to have that choice completely taken away, regardless of the good intentions or potential advantages the match would bring. His only comfort was that it had taken no time at all to conclude that Fleur was a fine young woman, to be esteemed for who she was rather than what she was. Even so, he was still struggling to come to terms with the fact that he was now tied to her for life.

This meeting was, so far as he could remember, the first time in which he was to be included and his opinion sought. It was heady for a young man who was anxious and determined to be seen as a young man rather than to be referred to as "the boy," as his uncle had always called him.

He stumbled only slightly upon exiting the Floo—a fact which he noted with some pride, not to mention a certain relief—and was greeted by his friends. Hermione, Fleur, and the younger Weasley siblings were to be included in the meeting as well. Neville and Luna, who were of age with Harry and engaged in the training, were excluded for the time being, not only due to their lack of knowledge about the Order in the first place, but also because Dumbledore was



uncertain whether their guardians would approve of their inclusion. Depending upon their level of skill and whether they ultimately were deemed trustworthy—which Harry felt certain they were—he intended to speak with Dumbledore when the time was right about their inclusion.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed as soon as he appeared. He found himself immediately engulfed in one of her trademark hugs, which, he reflected, were very warm and comforting, much like Hermione herself.

When the young brunette witch released him, he grinned at her before turning to greet the Weasleys, noting the congenial smile on Ginny's face, the twins' irrepressible grins, and Ron's own broad smile. By then, Appoline, Jean-Sebastian, Fleur, and Sirius—who had insisted on attending—had emerged from the Floo. The adults smiled at the youngsters before making their way from the room, leaving Fleur and her betrothed in the care of the others.

The group engaged in small talk for a few moments, most of the conversation seeming to center around what had happened since they had all been together last—as though they had not seen one another at Moody's training session only the day before. Unfortunately for Harry, the twins made certain to exact their pound of flesh, teasing him about being cooped up in that great big mansion with only his incredibly gorgeous fiancée for company. Harry bore it as best he could and found, to his delight, that the most effective method of deterring them from their fun was to tease them back about their own inability to find themselves a "gorgeous witch" of their own. Needless to say, the banter was friendly and playful, and Fleur's judicious use of her allure at the right moment—thereby turning the young men into gibbering imbeciles—helped Harry get the better of the exchange.

Their time together was interrupted by Sirius, who poked his head into the room after several minutes had passed. "Showtime, everyone!" was his ebullient declaration.

Eagerly, the seven young people traded glances, and as one, they moved from the room. The house at Grimmauld was large and dark, but a few rooms had been made almost habitable by their efforts at cleaning it earlier that month. They were led to one of those rooms. It was a large sitting room, and it had been cleared of all the old,

ghoulish furniture, which had been replaced with a number of chairs and a small, portable lectern in one of the corners. The order members all appeared to be there, and though Harry was familiar with some—such as his former DADA professor Remus Lupin—there were a great many faces which he did not recognize.

They were directed toward a group of chairs nearest the lectern and took their seats gingerly, an amused Harry noting that his friends were all as excited and nervous as he himself felt. Unfortunately, the first test of their fortitude was made almost before they were able to seat themselves.

"Ron, what are you and your friends doing here?" Mrs. Weasley demanded, rising to her feet and stalking to the front of the room until she stood in front of the teenagers, her hands on her hips, and her eyes filled with a fiery indignation.

Ron was nonplused by his mother's displeasure—he had seen her unhappy enough times to know when his mother was in danger of experiencing a serious eruption.

Seeing his friend in this state, Harry answered for him. "We were invited, Mrs. Weasley."

Though her eyes narrowed for a moment, Mrs. Weasley's expression soon softened, and she smiled. Unfortunately, her smile seemed to be full of condescension, and it immediately annoyed Harry.

"Harry, dear, there must have been some mistake," Mrs. Weasley answered. "This is a meeting of the order, not some lark for school children. You are all too young to be here. Now run along and keep each other company while we discuss what is to be done. We will talk about your behavior after the meeting."

"Ah, but they were invited," interjected Jean-Sebastian. A quick glance by Harry at his new guardian revealed that Jean-Sebastian still sat in his seat, seemingly at ease, but Harry, who had started to get to know the man, could tell his seriousness in the intensity of his gaze, and the tone of his voice.

"Your headmaster and I discussed the matter at some length and agreed that the young people are ready for the burden, particularly

with the fact that some of them have faced your dark lord more than once."

"They are too young," Mrs. Weasley insisted. "They should not have to bear the burden that is rightfully ours as their guardians."

"Harry and his friends appear to have been targeted specifically by Voldemort," Jean-Sebastian countered. "As a result, they will be on the front lines of this fight before long. Besides, Harry himself has faced—and triumphed—over Voldemort more than once since he returned to your world, and as such, he deserves to know what is happening. How many times have you faced the dark lord?"

Mrs. Weasley's eyes were mere slits by now, her displeasure evident for the entire room to see. Jean-Sebastian, however, affected not to notice this, as he continued to regard her with a slightly less than friendly expression.

"My wife and I," he said, gesturing to Appoline, "have decided to attend this meeting in order to determine whether we will support your order. The safety of my family is paramount, as I am certain is the case with yours as well. Thus far, I have been impressed with your people and your methods, but I can tell you that your attitude is not helping matters."

A loud sniff of disdain met his declaration, but Mrs. Weasley, though she obviously would have preferred to protest further, had sensed she would not be able to carry the point.

"I am sure I do not know how you raise your children in France, but here we do not allow our children to face danger when it is our duty to protect them."

She fixed her stare on the children. "Harry, I cannot force you to leave because of your guardian," she spat the word with some disdain and glared at the French ambassador, "but my own children will not attend. Boys, Ginny, Hermione, you will leave now and return to your rooms. I will meet you upstairs later to discuss your defiance."

"In France, we allow our children to grow and give them more responsibilities as they do so in order for them to improve, Mrs.

Weasley," Jean-Sebastian snapped, all pretense toward friendliness now gone.

"Mrs. Weasley, you are not my guardian," Hermione quietly said. "I will stay with Harry."

Mrs. Weasley had just rounded on the girl when her husband stepped forward and took her by the arm, leading her back to her chair. "Dumbledore and Jean-Sebastian spoke to me about the children's inclusion, Molly, and I agreed. Now, let's sit down and wait for the headmaster."

"Indeed, we did speak of it, Molly," the voice of Dumbledore intoned as he entered the room. "Harry and his friends have shown remarkable maturity in meeting the challenges they have come up against, and I believe that they will bring a fresh perspective to our deliberations."

"Now, if everyone is ready," he continued, striding up to the lectern, "I believe we should call this meeting to order."

The room quieted, and the meeting began, much to Harry's relief. He had not expected Mrs. Weasley's objections, though he likely should have. He knew she was a good woman who had the best of intentions and a genuine care for his—and the others'—welfare, but she also had certain opinions and was very strong-willed. That did not stop her from seeming overbearing at times, and he found he did occasionally resent her tendency to think she knew best. However, he could not overlook the welcome she had always given him and the fact that she had often treated him as one of her own. He did not take pleasure in her set-down, but he was glad his friends had all been able to stay for the meeting.

The meeting turned out to be more of a general planning session than the council of war Harry had been imagining in his mind. The first topic of discussion was security—which for obvious reasons was a primary concern. Grimmauld Place, which was under a Fidelius Charm, was as safe as magic could make it, as long as the secret keeper kept it from the enemy. As Dumbledore himself was the secret keeper, there was virtually no possibility of their security being breached. However, the Burrow, the various members' residences, and the Granger home were all considered to be softer targets which the enemy could exploit. There was some discussion

about the Ambassador's Mansion, but as the residence was under heavy warding of its own—and as there were several French Aurors present—it was deemed to be safe enough for the present time being. In addition to this, there was a guarded Floo Connection to the French Floo Network, which allowed an escape route should the defenses be overwhelmed.

As for the other locations, it was decided that Bill Weasley—being very familiar with warding schemes due to his employment as a Gringotts curse breaker—would be drafted into provided improved wards at all order member locations, including Hermione's parents' house. Mad-Eye Moody would assist him in this endeavor. In addition, all members and their families would carry emergency Portkeys to allow them a quick escape should a situation become untenable.

From there, the discussion moved to the subject of the Ministry and Fudge's likely response to his defeat in Harry's trial. A tall, dark-skinned man—who was introduced as Kingsley Shacklebolt—stood to give his report of the current state in the Ministry.

"Thus far, Minister Fudge has done nothing to increase the Auror budget—and no more than the normal number of new Aurors is being hired. The official policy within the Ministry is that Harry is lying and trying to stir up trouble. Minister Fudge has authorized a press release for tomorrow which is aimed at discrediting Harry and reassuring the public that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has not returned and that we are all safe."

"Is he mad?" a woman from the back row demanded.

"No, he's a politician," Sirius replied with a cynical laugh. "Fudge only cares about his public image and the amount of money in his pocket, and war is bad for business. By denying You-Know-Who's return, he can continue to keep the money rolling into his vault."

"Unfortunately, that's a pessimistic, but accurate statement, Sirius," Dumbledore confirmed. "In spite of my advice, Minister Fudge refuses to listen and will take no action which will appear to confirm the dark lord's return in any way. Nor will he authorize any investigation into Harry's claims. It is clear he has chosen to hide his head in the sand and will do nothing unless forced."

"The Wizengamot is fractured, with few of the factions agreeing on any matter, and certainly not enough to come to a consensus. I have had private conversations with various Wizengamot members over the past few days and have determined that I do not have the votes to have Fudge removed from office. Therefore, I believe the burden of opposing the dark lord will fall to the order until we can influence some change in leadership."

The room fell silent as the members absorbed that piece of news. It was not unexpected—Fudge had made his position very clear, after all—but to have it confirmed was certainly not welcome in any way.

"For now, as Voldemort must gain his strength and marshal his forces, our missions will likely be confined to intelligence gathering, but the longer the Ministry goes without making any sort of preparations, the less tenable our situation will be. We must come up with some way to force the Ministry to take the threat seriously, as I do not doubt that we do not have the resources to prosecute a war against Voldemort ourselves."

"It's possible that we may be able to get Madam Bones to support a more active response to the Death Eaters," Shacklebolt suggested. "She's pragmatic, no nonsense, and just a little disgusted with Fudge in general."

"That is an option," Mr. Weasley said with a hint of wariness. "But she would have to be careful to fly her broom close to the ground. If Fudge gets wind of what she is doing, he may even have her replaced, and to do that now with You-Know-Who on the rise would be disastrous."

"I can speak with Madam Bones," said Dumbledore. "She will understand the need to keep her actions quiet, and I have every confidence in her ability to withstand Death Eater attacks for the time being. Does anyone have anything else to bring up?"

"Sir?" Harry asked a little diffidently. He felt he had something to share, but to do so under the eyes of the entire gathering during his first meeting was a little intimidating.

"Yes, Harry?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

"I was thinking, sir—everything I've seen of the Minister says that he's not going to admit he was wrong unless he's forced into it. I don't know how, but he'd almost have to see Voldemort for himself before he'd believe it. Is there some way we can force a confrontation?"

Dumbledore was silent for several moments, and speculative murmurs sprung up throughout the room. Harry glanced to Hermione by his side, noting that she was smiling at him in approval. He returned the grin and turned his attention back to the headmaster.

"At present, I doubt Voldemort can be lured from his lair," Dumbledore said, appearing deep in thought. "However, that doesn't mean that your idea does not have merit. There may be an opportunity at some point, and if such does present itself, we will need to be ready to seize it. Very good thinking, Harry."

Flushing at the praise, Harry nodded his thanks and settled in for the rest of the meeting. The rest of the time passed as they discussed the order's strategy and the different assignments which Dumbledore gave to members of the group. For now, it appeared that they were very much waiting to see what the enemy would do, while attempting to counter whatever the Death Eaters threw at them. It was perhaps not the ideal position, but it was the best they had for the present.

The meeting broke up soon after that, and though there was much uncertainty over Voldemort's plans and the state of the Ministry, Harry was convinced that someone was doing what was possible to mitigate the danger. He was especially pleased that the order was taking steps to protect its members—especially the Grangers, who would have no wards to protect them whatsoever. He knew how devastated Hermione would be if she lost her parents...

Though she said not a word, Mrs. Weasley's disdainful glance at the children as she left the room spoke volumes. Harry almost sighed—she clung to her beliefs tenaciously, and there was precious little he could do to change them. He decided not to be concerned, however; he was certain she would eventually come around. At the very least, he did not live at Grimmauld any longer, so he would be able to avoid her if she was unpleasant.

The best part of the night, in Harry's opinion, was the discussion between the headmaster and J.S. before they returned to the Ambassador's Mansion. One of his greatest fears had been that his guardian would not agree with the order's goals and would strike out on his own, putting Harry in a difficult position. Their conversation ended any chance of that happening.

"Well, Jean-Sebastian, I hope that this meeting calmed your fears and that you will continue to work with us."

Jean-Sebastian smiled at Dumbledore and indicated his acquiescence with a slight bow. "It has. Anything you need from me will be provided."

"Very well, then."

Dumbledore excused himself to go, leaving the rest of the occupants of the room to mill about and speak to one another about the meeting they had just left. Harry particularly enjoyed speaking a few moments with his friends. Things were looking up for him, and he was looking forward to continuing to get to know his new family better.

In another part of the old house, Molly Weasley fumed about the situation and the loss of all her plans. This latest straw—having that awful Mr. Delacour set her down in front of the children—was just another reason for her to dislike him. The children were too young—they needed to step back and allow the adults to take care of them, as was their right and duty.

What Molly did not acknowledge, even to herself, was her fear. She had not escaped the first war unscathed—few had—and though she would largely not acknowledge it even to herself, she was afraid of once again going through the heartbreak of losing another loved one to that damned dark lord. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had been directly responsible for the deaths of her twin brothers, and the ache she felt at their loss, though dulled with time, was still keenly felt. She wanted to keep the children safe at all costs, and it was very difficult to admit that they were growing up and could take care of themselves.

That Harry, a young man of whom she was genuinely fond, was now in a better home situation was something to be glad about, as



personally distasteful as she found the Delacours. He was closemouthed about his experiences during his childhood, but she suspected that the Muggles he had lived with were, at the very least, apathetic toward him, not caring for him in the manner that they should have.

It still rankled, however, that if he should leave their care, then he would not be put in hers. She was far better known to the boy than the Delacours and was able to provide a far healthier environment for his upbringing than they could, she was certain. And that betrothal...

The mere thought of the fact that Harry was betrothed filled Molly with indignation, especially since it was to that hussy! Harry was perfect for Ginny! He had saved her in the chamber, for Merlin's sake—it bespoke to his noble and self-sacrificing nature, which was all Molly wanted for her only daughter, and in her mind, it tied them together with an unbreakable bond. Of course, it would not hurt that the boy's social and financial situation could only bolster that of the Weasleys—Harry truly did not completely understand the stature he could command in their world, not only due to his status as the Boy-Who-Lived, but also because of the fact that the Potters had a very old name and had always been influential. Their substantial wealth did not hurt matters either.

But Harry's stature and birthright were secondary to all other concerns. Ginny was her baby, and since Ginny had been a little girl, she had idolized the Boy-Who-Lived and fantasized about marrying him. And since that was what Ginny wanted, Molly had been determined that she would help her only daughter to achieve that goal, whatever it took. This contract with the French witch all but put that notion to rest, unless Ginny were to consider a multiple marriage with the young man.

She continued to chew upon the issue, worrying at it from every side she could think of, but nothing presented itself. No matter how she approached the situation in her mind, there was nothing she could do. Harry Potter was, for all intents and purposes, engaged to Fleur Delacour, and there was nothing to be done about it.

"Come to bed, Molly," the voice of her husband startled her from her thoughts. She glanced around, and noting the time on the clock, she

wondered at how long she had stewed, thinking about her daughter and the boy who she considered good as a son.

She swiftly prepared herself for sleep and joined her husband in their bed, lifting the blankets to her chin while letting out a long sigh of frustration. Arthur, who knew her better than anyone else, regarded her in silence before breaking it with a gentle remonstrance.

"Molly, I understand you are not happy about this betrothal business, but I believe it is truly in Harry's best interests at this point."

"How can you say that?" Molly demanded. "How can that... that... girl be good for Harry, who is the gentlest, nicest boy I have ever met? We know nothing about her, Arthur, and being a Veela, she is almost certainly a scarlet woman!"

"You know no such thing," Arthur reprimanded. "Everything I've seen of her suggests that she is quiet and pleasant. There is no reason to vilify her."

Arthur regarded her for a moment, his eyes intent, and Molly was reminded of the fact that though her husband often appeared to be oblivious and intent upon his eccentric interests, he was an intelligent man, and not entirely blind to what was occurring around him.

"Now, what is this all about, Molly?" he asked. His tone, while gentle and affectionate, was also commanding—he was not about to let this go without a fight.

"Arthur, you know Ginny has always idolized Harry. She is very upset about this betrothal, and I am upset for her—she and Harry would be perfect together if not for these Delacours interfering."

"Are you forgetting Sirius, love? He was the instigator of this in the first place."

"Yes, Sirius had a hand in it, and though I do not like it, I am well aware of the fact that he is only trying to do his best for Harry. He should have consulted us—what can an unmarried man of his age, who has spent the last decade of his life in prison, know about raising a young boy?"

Arthur sighed and snuggled closer into his wife, a movement which she returned, feeling somewhat comforted by his presence.

"Molly, Ginny has never idolized Harry—she idolized the Boy-Who-Lived. It is only recently that she has begun to see him for himself rather than for his fame.

"And if I may be so bold, I'd like to point out that she appears to be handling this better than you are."

"But, Arthur—"

"No, Molly," Arthur interrupted, using a firm tone he rarely used with her. "You need to step back and allow the children to live their lives. If Ginny is meant to be with Harry, I do not doubt that she will still end up with him—he is a prime candidate for a multiple marriage, after all.

"And besides, I think you're missing the reaction of another who is much closer to Harry than Ginny has ever been."

Molly turned her puzzled gaze on her husband. "Pardon me?"

Arthur chuckled quietly. "You've been so focused on Ginny that I'm not surprised you missed it. Though she's handled it very well, I believe that Hermione has been just as upset with the betrothal as Ginny—if not more so."

"Hermione?" Molly demanded.

"Yes, Molly. I think our little resident bookworm has fancied Harry for some time now. It's hardly surprising, if you think about it—they are practically inseparable."

Was it true? How could she have missed such a thing? Unless, of course, her normally somewhat distracted husband was completely mistaken. But if he was not mistaken, then what about...

"But Arthur, what about Ronnie?"

"Yes, I've noticed Ron's infatuation with her, too," Arthur confirmed with a smile.

"Arthur, Ron would be so disappointed to learn that Hermione has feelings for Harry. I can't bear to have two children upset."

"You have no choice, Molly," replied Arthur firmly. "They have their own choices and must live their own lives. Besides, despite Ron's feelings, I truly doubt that he and Hermione could cease their frequent disagreements long enough to come to an understanding of such significance. I'm afraid they are not well suited to one another at all."

It was only the truth, Molly had to admit. Much as she loved all of her children, she was not blind to Ron's faults, and she knew that a driven and intelligent young woman such as Hermione—who shared virtually no common interests with him—would not likely develop feelings for Ron under such circumstances. Ron had undoubtedly improved over the years—and she could only admit that Hermione and Harry's influence had much to do with it—but he still had a certain amount of growing to do.

"Now, Molly, I must have your word on this—you must not interfere. The children must be free to live their own lives with whomever they wish. Leave them alone, my dear—I have no doubt they will work it out themselves."

Molly murmured her agreement, which seemed to satisfy her husband, and within minutes, he was snoring softly. In the back of her mind, however, she could not help but worry the situation like a dog with a bone. There must be something she could do to save her daughter from heartache. She would have to continue to think on it.

The next week after the order meeting saw a slight change in the training program. While Moody continued to drill them in stances, avoiding curses, and the proper way to move about a battlefield, he also began to move them toward learning more about curses and hexes which they would use in a duel. He was very blunt with them, telling them all he was covering months of training in the period of a few days. However, it was necessary, for, as he told them, they did not have months and months to prepare. Once they arrived at school, they would need to continue to practice what they had learned, and they could call on the headmaster (when he was available) or Professor Flitwick (who had been considered a master

duelist in his youth). Next year, he told them, he would continue on with their training in the summer.

The other circumstance which changed was the fact that from Monday of that week, the entire group Flooed to the manor with their trunks, as it had been decided that they would stay the entire week there rather than returning after their sessions were complete. It had been a joint idea put forth by Fleur and Harry. It afforded them more time with their friends and helped build their level of camaraderie. Harry particularly was happy to have his friends there for longer, and Fleur, though she was still getting to know Harry's friends, welcomed the opportunity to do so more quickly.

In fact, by the end of the first week, Hermione had all but moved into the manor and away from Grimmauld Place. Her parents had visited the Delacours the day after the order meeting—with Hermione joining them, of course—and had come to stay the final weekend of the summer as well, meaning Hermione stayed for that weekend as well.

In the Grangers, Harry found a couple who genuinely cared about their daughter's wellbeing and happiness, and as a consequence, they had accepted wholeheartedly her status as a witch, even though it had seriously curbed the time they were able to spend with their daughter. They took to Harry immediately as Hermione's closest friend, and it was not long before he was calling them by name—William and Elizabeth.

Of course, this arrangement was also the cause of a certain amount of discontent in their group as well. Specifically, the Weasley children, who were there at their mother's rather grudging acceptance, were absolutely refused when they applied to their parents to stay the last weekend of the summer with the Delacours as well. It was understood by all that although the given reason for Mrs. Weasley's refusal was the fact that she would not see her children again until Christmas, a rather large consideration was the fact that she truly did not like the Delacours and would prefer her children spent as little time with them as possible. She was barely tolerant of her children training with "those foreign people" at all.

The twins took this decision rather stoically—most of the rest of the group were younger than they were, after all, and they decided they could plot their pranks from Grimmauld place more effectively

anyway. Ginny, though disappointed that she was not to spend more time with her friends—including Harry, who she was coming to know on a more personal basis—was also philosophical about it. She would be in their company for the next several months, and she was happy to spend some more time with her parents.

The true difficulty was Ron. He was decidedly unhappy that his request had been denied and had complained loud and long on the matter. His mother was not to be moved, however, and Ron spent the entire weekend at Grimmauld Place seething, angry over the loss of his time with Hermione and imagining everything that Harry might be getting up to with her.

For Hermione's part, she was rather suspicious of Ron. He had seemingly changed overnight, and though the change could be said to be for the better, there almost seemed to be a forced quality to it. He was much more considerate of her feelings, for instance, and he rarely provoked a disagreement with her. There had been times, however, when he had appeared to be on the verge of an explosion and had curbed his natural tendency just in time. The rest of the time, he paid a lot of attention to her, flattering her with comments and giving her awkward little gifts. It was almost like he had someone coaching him and was now set on making a move upon her. It was most disconcerting to the young woman who had rarely attracted such attention in the past, but on the other hand, it also felt good to have someone behave in such a way toward her. Not that she was in danger of falling to his charms—she was firmly of the opinion that they would do badly together as a couple.

As for the various relationships between the disparate members of the group, while they appeared to get along well, there were certain undercurrents that passed between them which often appeared to only the discerning eye. Neville and Luna seemed somewhat blind to the underlying tensions between certain other members of the group, but that was hardly surprising, given the fact that everyone else was much more familiar with each other than they were, with the possible exception of Fleur.

Fleur's initial relationship with Ginny was characterized by wariness, though they had warmed to each other significantly by the end of the first week. For those who were perceptive enough, it was clear that their initial difficulties were based almost solely upon Ginny's all-consuming jealousy of the older witch. However, this jealousy was

quickly eased because Fleur made the effort to get to know Ginny, and Ginny, for her part, discovered that Fleur was a pleasant and intelligent witch. She soon realized that Fleur had been forced into this as much as Harry had—once she had realized and accepted that fact, it was much easier to get to know the French witch without any rancor straining their relationship.

Between Hermione and Fleur, a fast friendship had formed, and the two were much in each other's confidence early on in their relationship. They were different in some respects, but they had many similarities as well, the least of which was not the fact that they had both been loners to a certain extent in their younger years, Fleur due to her heritage, and Hermione due to her intelligence. And as they were both interested in Harry's happiness, they found that they had much common ground upon which to base a friendship.

Finally, a certain amount of friction had also sprung up between Harry and Ron, though Harry was not completely certain the cause for this. He had known that Ron was not happy to have had to stay at Grimmauld Place the Sunday Hermione had come to visit with her parents, but what that had to do with him, he could not be certain. Ron, however, was not about to let it lie, and Harry would soon find out what was bothering his friend.

Ron was frustrated. He had never been exactly a paragon of patience (even Ron could admit he was not blessed with that particular virtue), and the situation with Hermione was wearing on him.

Perhaps amazingly, for one who was not normally particularly fond of books, Ron had taken the one that the twins had given him and read through it in no time. The book had been filled with such helpful tips and instructions, and he had been inordinately pleased with himself—surely with this aid, he could go about wooing his closest female friend!

But unfortunately, it had not happened that way. Though Ron had made good use of the book, following its instructions to the letter, something appeared to be missing. Hermione seemed as though she was warming to him, and she appeared to be appreciative of the effort he was making to show her how he felt, but beyond that, she seemed unaffected. It was driving Ron barmy—he was stuck, and he did not know what he should do.

In addition, Harry's relationship with Hermione looked as though it was stronger than ever—they laughed and joked together, and both appeared to be drawing closer than ever to the Veela, though Ron himself was still rather tongue-tied around the girl. This was not the way things were supposed to go.

In his mind's eye, Ron could only imagine what Harry and Hermione were getting up to when he was not around. How could Harry do this to him? He already had a beautiful Veela at his beck and call—why could Harry not leave Hermione for him?

He was not about to stand for it, and he resolved to confront Harry on the situation immediately.

His chance came on the Tuesday of that week. The training group had just been dismissed by Moody, and the other participants had already left, and though Ron would have liked to get to dinner, which he was certain had already been set out for them, he knew there was likely no better time to confront his friend.

"Harry, I'd like to talk to you for a moment," Ron said a little hesitantly. Harry was a good friend, after all, and he did not wish to anger him—their relationship had already taken a bit of a beating due to Ron's behavior over the Triwizard (Ron's fault, he was able to admit to himself), and Ron did not wish for them to become further estranged. But he could not let Harry snap up all the good witches!

"Sure, Ron," Harry replied from the bench where he was lacing his shoes. "What's up?"

"I just wanted to talk to you about Hermione."

Harry looked up at him, confused. "Hermione? What about her?"

"Well... I was kind of wondering..."

As Ron stammered, trying to find the words to ask his question, Harry's countenance became even more confused.

"What is it, Ron?"



"What is your relationship with her?" Ron finally blurted out, inwardly wincing at just how inelegant his sudden question sounded.

"My relationship?" Harry echoed uncertainly. "I'm not certain what you are referring to, Ron. I believe my relationship with Hermione is much as it as ever been—she's my friend, and I'm grateful to her for believing in me, for always sticking up for me."

"That's not what you told her last week!" snapped Ron. "You told her that she was your best friend! Just what did you mean by that?"

Harry's look became speculative and more than a little darker. He glared at Ron, making Ron feel even more uncomfortable. But he would not give in—he had to know what Harry's intentions toward Hermione were!

"I wasn't aware that you were in the habit of eavesdropping on private conversations."

"Just answer the question, Harry!"

"Fine," said Harry, rising to his feet. "Hermione is my best friend!"

Ron's jaw dropped, and he peered at Harry in disbelief. "But Harry, I'm your best friend! We've been through everything together—best mates and all—how can you say that Hermione—a girl!—is closer than we are?"

"Does the term 'Triwizard Tournament' mean anything to you, Ron?" was Harry's sarcastic reply.

Blushing crimson, Ron hung his head in shame—perhaps Harry was right. Ron had not behaved well during that whole debacle, though he had assumed that Harry had forgiven him.

"Listen, Ron," Harry continued in a more conciliatory tone, "I don't hold that against you, but since you asked, I will tell you. Hermione never doubted me, while you would not talk to me for over a month, even though I told you all along I wanted nothing to do with the tournament and didn't enter my name into it.

"To be honest with you, Ron, that's not the only time."

Startled, Ron looked up at Harry, noting the expression of seriousness on his face.

"You've been a bit of a flake at times, not only to me, but also to Hermione. I consider you a friend, Ron—a best friend even—and I know that no matter how you flake out, you'll always come to your senses sooner or later. But I must admit that waiting for you to get over it can be somewhat wearing.

"That is why Hermione is my best friend. She's never put me through that. Hell, the only time I've ever fought with her at all was when she turned my Firebolt in to McGonagall in the third year, and even then, she did it for me, because she was scared that I would get hurt."

Embarrassed, Ron considered Harry's words and decided they were completely correct. There had been times when he had been jealous of Harry or had treated him badly, and he knew that if he wanted to maintain their friendship, he would have to improve his behavior.

"I'll try to do better, Harry," he mumbled, hoping his friend would accept that.

"I know, Ron," replied Harry with a grin. "I know you try. I just hope you get over your jealousy some time. You don't seem to realize it, but it's not always fun and games being Harry Potter."

Ron was aware of this—perhaps subconsciously—but Harry seemed to get the short end of the stick more than most. Still, this was something to be considered at another time. For now, Harry still had not given him an answer for exactly how he viewed Hermione, and Ron was not about to let him go until he had some idea of what he was up against.

"But what about Hermione?" Ron pressed. "I know she's a friend, but what do you... think of her?"

A true smile came over Harry's face, and he chuckled with pure amusement. "So that's what this is all about. You think I fancy Hermione?"

"Don't you?" Ron challenged.

"Doesn't matter, now does it?" Harry asked, completely solemn. "Ron, I am bound by a marriage contract with Fleur. Hermione..."

His sudden pause when speaking of the young witch caused Ron to peer at him with heightened suspicion. It appeared very much the case that Harry did have feelings of some sort for Hermione. Ron was not happy with the confirmation.

"Even if I do have feelings for Hermione, I can hardly act on them because of my contract with Fleur, now can I? Do you think I would betray either Fleur or Hermione that way—or that Hermione would even accept such an arrangement? What are you thinking, Ron?"

It was all the confirmation Ron needed. He knew that just because Harry had a betrothal contract with Fleur, he could still woo Hermione due to his status and ability to marry more than one witch. But if Harry did not know that, then Ron would not be the one to illuminate him on the subject. He knew Harry would find out about it some time, but Ron hoped that by the time he did, Ron would already have secured Hermione's affections.

"I'm sorry, Harry—you're right," was all Ron said. "It's just... I like Hermione, you know?"

"I suspected," Harry admitted. "Have you told her?"

"I'm working on it."

"I suggest you do."

Ron peered at his friend, wondering just how sincere he was being—after all, Ron was convinced that Harry also had feelings for Hermione, whether he had admitted it to himself or not. But Harry was too noble to do what Ron had suggested, and Ron—belatedly—realized that fact. He would have to begin repairing his relationship with his friend in earnest.

"Listen, Harry, I just got a bit jealous, what with your close relationship with her. I want to get together with her, you know?"

"I do, Ron, but I suggest you speak with her about it. Don't pull me into this—I already have Fleur to worry about, and getting to know her is all I can handle right now."

"Sure, Harry," said Ron. Then he slapped his friend on the back. "Let's get to dinner—I'm starving!"

Harry grinned, and they left the room. For Ron, he was content with the outcome of the discussion. With Harry admitting himself that he had no designs on Hermione, Ron doubted there would be anyone else even in the running. Things were looking up!

## Chapter 9 – Choices

There was perhaps no race of being upon the earth as misunderstood as the race of Veela.

Many considered them to be little more than creatures—on the same level as giants or dragons, and though they resembled humans more closely than most other races, it was a common opinion that they needed to be regulated, like most other non-human races were. Nothing could be further from the truth. Veela were physiologically identical to any "normal" human beings—they simply had special and very specific abilities which set them apart from the rest of the human race.

For one, Veela had an alternate form into which they could change—at moments of great stress or fear when young, though control was achieved as the Veela matured. They were creatures of fire, having an affinity for all types of fire magic, and able to hurl destructive fireballs when they had changed into their alternate forms.

The Veela abilities regarding emotions, or more specifically love, were also a widely misunderstood facet of their abilities. Most considered Veela to be purely sexual beings, and their history had been one which had reflected that belief. It had not been uncommon for wealthy men to own a Veela slave, when such things had been legal, and even now, Veela were sought after as second wives, or even as concubines in some cultures. It was that fact that made growing up—and even in some cases adult life—difficult for many Veela, as most of them went through every day life knowing that most men who saw them were interested in their looks and not much more.

In truth, however, Veela were highly attuned to the emotion of love, their sexual nature merely being a byproduct of their ability to sense the wants and desires of their partners. True, the allure acted as a magnet and in some cases a weapon against those who were affected by such things, but for a Veela, nothing was more attractive than a prospective mate who could withstand the effects of the allure. They could sense love in others, in all its various forms, which was why if a Veela was fortunate to find true love, they quickly recognized this, and went through life secure in their partner's affections.

As Fleur reflected on the past weeks in the company of her betrothed, she thought on what she had been able to glean from his emotions. She knew that she had yet to touch Harry's heart, not surprising considering his upbringing and the way this whole situation had been sprung upon him. Far from feeling frustration for his hesitance, she was glad he still seemed to be cautious of moving their relationship forward too quickly. She knew from experience that Harry was almost immune to her allure, and for him to fall in love with her so quickly would indicate an emotional immaturity and weakness of character which would be at odds with the strength of mind which allowed him to resist her.

No, Fleur was perfectly content to allow her relationship with Harry to follow its natural course, helped along by nothing more than time spent in one another's company, and the manner in which they would hopefully become friends, and later lovers. Besides, beyond the fact that she could sense emotions, as a Veela, Fleur was also very instinctively able to determine compatibility, and she knew that she and Harry were well-suited for one another. Her future looked bright with Harry, not only when considering Harry's character and abilities, but also from the likelihood of their becoming emotionally attached to one another. She knew that it was only a matter of time—eventually they would come to love one another. This was not an issue.

What was an issue were the emotions Harry so blatantly displayed from someone else—at least it was blatant to a Veela who naturally noticed these things. In short, though she suspected Harry himself did not understand his own feelings, Fleur was positive that he was in love with his best friend. And if she was any judge of the matter, Fleur was certain that Hermione returned Harry's feelings wholeheartedly. Of course, they were only fifteen years of age, but already Fleur could tell that regardless of their tender years, their mutual feelings were not the kind of childish infatuation most teenagers could be expected to feel. Theirs was the kind of mature regard and love Fleur so desperately wanted for herself—the kind of love built upon years of friendship and mutual respect and affection.

On one level, Fleur felt bad about the fact that the marriage contract had essentially removed Harry's choice. Assuming they had ever truly been able to communicate their feelings, Fleur knew that Harry and Hermione were as good a match as she was with Harry. Had it

been entirely left to their choices, Fleur never would have even been in the picture—their relationship being so much stronger due to their long friendship, they would almost certainly have married when they had upon reaching adulthood. The fact that it had not been her decision which had taken away his was a consolation, but as she had told him previously, she did feel responsible for the fact that his name would likely not continue with her as a wife. And she knew that this was a very big issue, whether he yet understood that fact or not.

Her parents were in much the same situation, in fact. Her father had given up much to marry her mother, and he had done it solely due to the fact that he loved her and would not live without her. Without a son, his own name would die out, and he could not even ask for a male grandchild to continue his name, due to the near impossibility of either Gabrielle or Fleur herself bearing two sons (one to carry on her husband's name, one to carry on her father's.)

Could she do this to Harry? Could she go through life knowing that such a venerable name as the magical Potters would disappear from the world with her as Harry's wife?

There was another way, of course. Fleur was well aware of the traditions and customs of the magical world, and knew that Harry, as the last surviving member of his family, was a prime candidate for having multiple wives. If Fleur could not give him a son, then by marrying someone else, he would have a much better chance to gain the heir he would some day want. And Fleur knew just who would fit into Harry's married life as seamlessly as she fit into her role as friend.

The problem, of course, was convincing Hermione that this was the right thing to do. Fleur was convinced of Hermione's feelings for Harry, but he also knew that the girl now considered Harry beyond her reach—the girl's sadness had not gone unnoticed. It would undoubtedly be a disaster if Hermione were to turn to someone else in her pain, especially as the person to whom she was most likely to turn was her other best friend.

Ron, though Fleur did not specifically dislike the redhead, was somewhat immature, and had certain issues he would have to work through before he could finally grow up. What was more, was that all of Fleur's senses told her that Ron was a very poor match for

Hermione, and that she would end up regretting her choice if she settled for Ron as a replacement for Harry. No, Ron would not do at all.

Again, the biggest problem for Hermione would be helping her to become accustomed to the thought of sharing her husband, for Hermione had been brought up in Muggle society which banned such unions as immoral and unnatural. Yet Fleur was almost certain that Hermione marrying Harry was the best thing the young woman could do. They suited one another on every level.

It helped, of course, that Fleur genuinely liked Hermione—she doubted she could have countenanced sharing her future husband with a woman she did not like wholeheartedly. With Hermione, she had no such issues. Hermione was not perfect, Fleur knew, but in an odd sort of way, Harry and Hermione balanced each others' strengths and weaknesses out rather well. And though perhaps others would scoff at Fleur's self-aggrandizement, she fancied that her presence with Harry would only improve the dynamic.

Perhaps it was time to have a quick chat with Hermione. Harry would not be ready for marriage for several years at least—not that Fleur herself was ready either—but if she got Hermione thinking about it early enough, maybe the girl would have to time get used to the idea and come to her own conclusion sooner, rather than later. Yes, she would need to speak with Hermione—before they returned to school, if possible.

A knock on Fleur's door brought her out of her musings. When she called out her permission to open the door, her mother stepped into the room.

It was unsurprising, perhaps, Fleur thought with an internal grin, that her mother should come to visit her just when she was contemplating her future life. She knew that Appoline had sensed the same things Fleur had—her mother probably knew earlier, as she had more than two decades more experience with her abilities than Fleur.

"Ah, ma cherié," greeted the elder Delacour woman. "I was hoping to speak with you."



"Of course, maman," said Fleur, rising from her reclined state and sitting on the edge of the bed. Her mother sat next to her and appeared to be considering her words before speaking. That she was concerned for her daughter, Fleur could easily tell—Veela women had a certain affinity for each other, which was only stronger between closely related females. Fleur had always known that her mother loved her and was there for her, regardless of the circumstances. It was a comfort beyond anything else she had ever known.

"Fleur, how are you getting along with Harry?" was the opening question.

"Fine, maman," Fleur responded. "He is a very nice young man, and treats me with respect and consideration. I believe that we will do very well together."

Appoline smiled at her daughter. "I believe you will. I have sensed the same thing about your young man. But do not forget to take the time to get to know him better—despite your apparent compatibility, a strong relationship will not grow from nothing. And I wish for you to have the same happiness in life that I have found with your father."

"I will, maman. We have only truly known one another for a few weeks now, so I am sure you realize that love has not grown between us. I am content to let it develop on its own."

Appoline Delacour eyed her daughter. "Yes, that is perhaps for the best."

Mother and daughter were silent for several moments, Fleur content to wait for her mother to get to the point, while her mother, she suspected, was searching for the proper way to broach the subject. She seemed to struggle with indecision, before she took a deep breath and began speaking once again.

"Fleur, I will not insult your attention by supposing that you have not seen the situation for yourself, but I wish to know what you mean to do about this situation between Harry and his best friend."

"Maman..."

Appoline's stern glance silenced her daughter. "Fleur, you cannot ignore the situation. Harry's feelings for Hermione are strong, and

returned in equal measure. You cannot begin a relationship with that hanging over your head."

An exasperated sigh was Fleur's response. "And what would you have me do, maman? If I push them on it, I do not doubt that at this point in time I would lose Harry altogether—oh, I know he cannot get out of the marriage contract, but I would give up any chance of making a connection with him. They have a strong bond of friendship, regardless of whatever else they feel for each other, and I do not wish to anger Harry by demanding he not see his closest friend. Besides, it is not fair to Harry—he did not choose this for himself."

"I am aware of that, Fleur," responded her mother evenly. "But should you not be selfish in this matter? Harry is to be your husband, not Hermione's."

"He could be husband to us both."

Though her piercing gaze never relented, Appoline's stern countenance softened and she put her arm around Fleur, hugging her in commiseration and support. "So, that is the lay of the land, is it?"

"It is maman, and I hardly think there is any other choice in the matter."

Feeling the upwelling of her emotions which she had previously held in check, Fleur rose and began to pace the floor, wringing her hands with some agitation. "Harry and Hermione are so close—as I've already told you, I don't think that forbidding them from seeing one another is the right thing to do, nor do I think it is fair. I did not choose this any more than Harry did, but I think in certain respects it has been easier on me, than it has on Harry. I do not have someone else with whom I am in love—Harry does, though he may not know it himself.

"Do I want to share my husband? Part of me shudders at the very thought. But another part recognizes the situation and accepts that it would be likely in any event—he is the last Potter, after all. And though I hesitate, I also understand that Hermione is such a fine young woman. I could have been forced to share my husband with someone much worse."

"You do not have to share your husband at all, Fleur," Appoline soothed. "You will be the first wife, after all—all others must be approved by you."

Fleur stopped her pacing and slumped back into her former place by her mother. "Perhaps that is true, maman. But there is also the matter of the continuation of Harry's line to consider. You know as well as I that the chance of giving him a son to continue his name are small. That leaves us the option of convincing some young man to forsake his own name and take upon our daughter's (and then have the same problem the next generation!) or allow Harry to take another wife, who should be able to give him a son."

Appoline's face curved into a smile. "Somehow this situation sounds familiar," she declared.

"You had the same issue with papa?"

"I did," Appoline confirmed with a smile. "Your father and I had a similar discussion when I informed him that I would likely be able to bear nothing but daughters. He declared he loved me and no other, and claimed that it did not matter to him a whit, as he would be as happy with daughters as he would be with a son, should a miracle happen and I give birth to a boy. And I don't think that he's ever regretted that decision. Perhaps Harry would be the same way."

"I am sure he would," Fleur responded. "Harry was not brought up in our world, and has not had the concept of carrying on the family name drilled into him. I'm sure Harry would claim the same."

"Then why do you fret? He is young—perhaps he will get over his infatuation with his friend in time."

Fleur stared at her mother incredulously. "I know you do not believe that, maman. You have much more experience with this than I do, and I can tell their emotions are true."

Appoline's answering grimace was rueful. "Much as I wish I could claim otherwise, I cannot."

"And that is why I have chosen as I have. I understand papa's situation, but papa was not forced into a betrothal contract when he

was in love with someone else. I will not take this away from Harry, maman—he deserves to have his heart's desire. I think highly of Hermione as well—she deserves Harry as much as he deserves her.

"Besides, maman, I have another motivation. I do not know why, but I feel as though Harry will require the support of us both in the time to come. I cannot explain it, but I know it is true."

The sharp gaze of her mother pierced her, but Fleur stood firm. She was not certain where this impression had come from, but the more she thought of it, the more she knew it was true. For Harry to be successful in his quest against Voldemort, he would need the support of them both.

"It appears, then, that you have made your decision. I will support you in this, as you well know."

Fleur smile and engulfed her mother in a large embrace. "I know you will, maman, and I thank you for it."

"I will support you, Fleur," Appoline said with a steady look, "but that does not mean I like this. I had hoped you would find true love with your young man."

"And who says that I will not?" replied Fleur, her manner impish. "Regardless of Harry's feelings for Hermione, I am still very compatible with him. Harry has more than enough room in his heart for both Hermione and I, maman. I am do not perhaps like the situation, but I am also confident that Harry and I can come in to our own feelings for each other, separate from what he also has with Hermione."

Appoline smiled and reached up to touch her daughter's face with affection. "I believe he does have an amazing capacity for love, my daughter—I believe he truly does."

At Hogwarts, the staff was busily preparing for the upcoming term, which was set to begin in only a few days. Summer was a time for a variety of tasks which were not able to be performed during the school year—the whole castle was aired out and cleaned, lessons for the upcoming year were prepared by the professors, and a myriad of other administrative tasks were completed, all necessary for the smooth and proper running of the school.

As had been their tradition as long as they had been in their respective positions—and Minerva McGonagall had been the deputy Headmistress since Horace Slughorn had retired, a period of well over a decade—Minerva found herself in the Headmaster's office, going over a last few details in preparation for the return of the students.

They had been doing this for so many years now and knew each other so well, that their meetings were almost always efficient and brief. Minerva knew that her mentor held the highest of confidence in her abilities, and was grateful for the fact. After all, due to his commitments with the Wizengamot and the ICW, it seemed as though Dumbledore was absent from the school as much as he was present. Minerva was the Headmistress in all but name for much of the year.

This particular meeting began no different from any other time they had met during the past decade. Minerva made her report of the incoming first year students—particularly the Muggleborn students, as it was part of her duty to deliver their acceptance letters and explain the new world in which they would soon find themselves.

They had made it a practice over the years to discuss the new students, and amuse themselves by guessing into which houses they would be sorted, almost making a game of it. Some were easy—Draco Malfoy, for example had been unlikely in the extreme to have been sorted into any other house other than Slytherin. Privately, Minerva thought the lad's destiny in Slytherin was due to his complete lack of loyalty to anyone other than himself (and perhaps his father, who invariably came up in just about any conversation with him), his less than stellar intellect, and the fact that he was a bully, and therefore a complete coward. It was the ones who could end up in multiple houses who were the most interesting to guess. And then there were those surprises such as Miss Granger, who no one thought would end up in Gryffindor.

"I do have one question, Albus," Minerva remarked after their conversation regarding the new students wound down.

"Please, Minerva," Dumbledore responded, leaning back in his chair.

"Miss Delacour. She will be attending Hogwarts this year, but what do you mean to do with her? Will you just place her in Gryffindor, or will you let the hat decide?"

Dumbledore appeared to contemplate the matter for several moments before responding. "Though it would be less than ideal to place her in a house without her betrothed, I think we shall have her wear the hat anyway. I suspect she will be placed in Gryffindor anyway, given what I know of her, so it should not matter."

Minerva nodded. "I remember the second task last year. It was clear she was terrified—understandable, given her nature—but she competed in defiance of her fears, the outcome notwithstanding."

"Exactly," rumbled Dumbledore. "If the hat does place her in another house, we will have to make a decision then. There are some houses for which she would not be suited at all, not that I believe the hat would place her there."

A grimace of distaste met his declaration. "She'd be in physical danger in Slytherin, Albus—you know this. Even many those whose families' are not associated with the Death Eaters would consider her a freak and a plaything."

"Quite," confirmed the Headmaster. "She is not without ambition, but it is not her defining trait, so I think the odds of that happening are very low in any case. But though she is intelligent, I do not think that Ravenclaw would suit her either. Of course Gryffindor would be best, though Hufflepuff would perhaps work for her as well."

McGonagall smiled and nodded. This conversation was likely academic anyway—she was almost certain to be sorted into Gryffindor.

"Bring her to my office before the feast, we can sort her in private," Dumbledore instructed. "There is no reason to subject her to a sorting in front of the entire school."

McGonagall expressed her agreement, before the Headmaster moved onto another topic.

"And what of your choices for Gryffindor prefect?"

"Yes, of course," McGonagall responded. Rarely had the choices for prefect been so obvious to her—in fact, Dumbledore likely already knew who she would choose, as well as she did herself.

"As neither of the head students this year are from Gryffindor, and my sixth and seventh year prefects performed their duties well last year, I will not be replacing any of them. As for fifth year, I don't think I've ever had such an easy decision in all my time at Hogwarts. The prefects will be Hermione Granger and Harry Potter."

Dumbledore was silent for several moments, stroking his beard as if in thought. McGonagall wondered at his unusual behavior—Miss Granger could not be disputed, and as the Headmaster took such pride in Mr. Potter's accomplishments, she was surprised he had not immediately agreed with her choices.

"Yes, Minerva, excellent choices indeed," he said at last. "However, do you not think that perhaps the fifth year prefect position should be offered to young Mr. Weasley instead of Mr. Potter?"

Nonplused at the Headmaster's words, it was all Minerva could do to keep her countenance. Dumbledore had never taken any overt interest in her choices in the past except to approve them. What possible reason could he have for objecting to the choice of Harry for prefect, especially given how she knew he personally felt for the boy?

Still, Dumbledore was nothing if not thoughtful and intelligent, and Minerva knew he would not suggest such a thing for no good reason. She opened her mouth to agree with him, when she considered his suggestion once again, and thought of the possible ramifications of the posting he was suggesting. No, she could not possibly agree with him without some sort of indication as to why he thought Harry should be passed over.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, but why do you believe Mr. Potter is unsuited for the position?"

"Not unsuited, Minerva," Dumbledore responded. "I have the highest confidence in Harry's abilities, as you well know. I am merely concerned about his state of mind and the many things he has to deal with. Perhaps the position of prefect would be too much for him to handle, under the circumstances."

McGonagall scowled. "I am afraid I must disagree, Albus. Harry is not perhaps the most studious young man I've ever taught—though a little application would go a long way in improving his grades—but his other qualities of leadership and maturity make him the best choice in my opinion. I also believe it sends a bad message to the entire house if a deserving young man such as Mr. Potter is passed over for the honor, for someone who is not nearly as qualified. Mr. Weasley is a good young man, but I believe he lacks the emotional maturity for the position.

"Besides, I feel it far better for Mr. Potter to learn to manage his life—all facets of his life—while he is young, rather than coddling him unnecessarily. If anyone can manage everything happening around him, I believe Harry is that young man. You do him a disservice by discounting his abilities in such a manner."

Dumbledore chuckled and bowed his head. "That is precisely why I appreciate your abilities and candor, Minerva. You are correct—I had been thinking of sparing Harry some responsibility, but I do agree that if anyone can handle the pressure, it is surely Mr. Potter. Thank you for setting me straight."

Mollified, Minerva responded it was no trouble, happy she was able to persuade him to her point of view. They spoke on for a few more moments before their meeting came to an end. Minerva left the office, her mind already upon the tasks she would need to complete to be ready for the students' arrival.

The last few days of summer holidays passed, leaving Harry wondering at all the changes which had occurred in his life over the past four weeks. It had been a lot to take in, but he was happy with everything which had happened, and was, for once, looking forward to the future with something akin to anticipation, rather than the dread which had often been his wont.

His relationship with Fleur, though still progressing very slowly, was at least characterized by a friendliness that he had not been certain he would be able to attain, and her personality, sweet, yet confident and determined, was one with which he was certain he would be able to love. Hermione had almost moved into the ambassador's manor, not returning to her home or Grimmauld Place for even the weekends, a situation which was made even better for the young



witch due to the fact that her parents were now regular visitors, and stayed throughout the weekend themselves. It was good, Harry reflected, that the Delacours were not uncomfortable around Muggles, and the Grangers had in a short time become very good friends with them.

The Weasley children—along with Neville and Luna—were much in evidence as well, though as a group they had not been allowed to stay for the weekends. Neville and Luna also returned to their homes for the weekends, though they had not been forced to by their guardians. Both simply stated that they would like to spend time at home—Luna with her father, and Neville with his gran—and their explanations were accepted for what they were.

In Neville, Harry had begun to see a true and loyal friend. The bumbling young man he had once been had been replaced, and now in his place stood one who was growing and maturing, and now that he had had his wand replaced, he was excelling where he once had thought he would never be able to do so. Harry now counted him a close friend, and was happy that he had joined them—his new confidence made him a great asset, and a better friend than ever before.

As for Luna, Harry was still not certain what to think of the quirky Ravenclaw. Her constant prattling of all the fantastical creatures which no one else could see sometimes had him wondering about her sanity. But she could be as lucid as anyone else—though always some what whimsical—leading Harry to wonder if there was something in her past which made her act as she did. As she had yet to open up about her past, Harry could not be certain, but he genuinely liked her and respected her abilities. And though she was not as brilliant as Hermione, she was clearly very intelligent, and added a dynamic to the group which would be missed if she were to disassociate herself with them.

The Wednesday before the end of the month saw the entire group engaged in their last training session with Moody. Though they had been clearly covering the material he taught at a highly accelerated rate, none of them had felt like they were getting in over their heads. Moody, as strange and paranoid as he was, had a way of imparting his message that made the learning all the easier, and Harry, though he knew he still had much to learn before he could truly be deemed proficient, felt as though he had learned more than had ever before.

After their session for that day, Moody gathered the entire group together and had them stand at attention, much as he had on his first day in the manor. Though Harry had heard all about Moody's philosophy from the man during the course of their training sessions—and from the imposter during the previous school year—the old Auror never tired of constantly harping on the lessons he taught. Their final lecture was quintessential Moody, and caused more than one set of rolled eyes and grins, though Harry knew his advice to be sound.

"Now then," the Auror began when they had all been arranged to his satisfaction, "this is your last training session before the end of the summer. Now, who among you thinks you have mastered everything I have to teach?"

No one said a word—not only did they all realize they had much to learn, but they also knew Moody was fond of spouting off questions designed to trip them up, then teaching them how wrong they were. This was one of his less than subtle attempts.

"Good. The first thing to be aware of is how little you know. I have been an Auror for more than fifty years, and I can tell you that I am still learning.

"You have all put your best effort into these sessions, and I must tell you I have been impressed with you all—high praise from me, I can tell you. You are all competent, and even gifted, and I know that you will continue to do well."

He stopped walking around the room and stood in front of them, fixing his gaze upon them sternly. Or at least his real eye was fixed on them—the false eye whirled this way and that, seemingly at random as it usually did. "However," he continued, emphasizing the word, "though you may be very competent, you will never improve if you do not continue to practice. Returning to Hogwarts is not an excuse to slack off—constant practice will be necessary to retain all that you have learned and improve.

"I will not be at Hogwarts this year—I have other tasks to accomplish. You can still enlist the assistance of the Headmaster, and though you may not know this, your Charms Professor was quite the duelist in his day. In addition to this, Miss Delacour and the two elder Mr.

Weasleys," he nodded to the elder students, "also have at least two more years of schooling than the rest of you—use their knowledge and set up a time when you can all practice together. Remember what I taught you, and you will do well.

"And above all," he suddenly thundered, "you must remember and practice constant vigilance!"

The twins shared an amused grin, while others of the group fought valiantly to keep their own from their faces. Of course, this did not go unnoticed by their trainer.

"Mr. Potter!" he barked.

"Yes, Auror Moody?"

"Do you know who the Death Eater children at Hogwarts are?"

Harry thought for a moment before replying. "I know some. There's Malfoy, of course, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Pucey, Zabini, probably Parkinson, the Greengrass sisters... Heck, all of Slytherin house could likely be included."

Moody's answering smile was positively feral.

"That's an assumption, Potter. The fact is that though some of the group you just mentioned were almost certainly Death Eaters, to paint the whole house with the same brush is incorrect. Remember this lesson—you must always be vigilant, but do not assume.

"Weasley!" he continued. "Who are the Death Eater spawn in Gryffindor house?"

The incredulous expression on Ron's face was priceless. "But... but... there are no children of Death Eaters in Gryffindor!" he sputtered, appearing highly offended.

"Are you certain? What evidence do you have? Were you at the Death Eater trials at the end of the first war? Can you see into the minds of your classmates and read their intentions and affiliations?"

Though he continued to sputter, Ron could say nothing in response. Harry glanced around the room, noting the looks of speculation on most of the faces. It was the general opinion in his house that Gryffindors were "good," while Slytherins were "evil." Most of those in the other houses seemed to occupy a position somewhere in between the two. But now that Harry thought of it, why should it be so? He had learned long ago that very few things were black and white—qualifying people in that matter was remarkably short-sighted, and inherently dangerous.

"What then, is Gryffindor house too noble to house Death Eaters and their children?"

Harry was hesitant to speak up, but he knew to what Moody was referring, and thought it would make a good object lesson. "What about Pettigrew?"

Moody's eyes pierced Harry—though the false one continued to gyrate insanely—and he stepped back with a grimace. "Pettigrew! Very good, Mr. Potter.

"What do you think, Mr. Weasley?" Mad-eye demanded of Ron. "Still think that everyone in your house must be lily white?"

Appearing thoughtful, Ron shook his head.

"And well you should not. Anyone can hide who they truly are. In fact, it is the truly cunning ones you must watch carefully. The Slytherins are known and can be a problem, even though they are mostly milksops who are not as dangerous as their parents were. But it is the Death Eater sympathizers in the other houses who you truly must beware of.

"Even if no one in your house is an actual Death Eater, can you be certain that none of them are under the Imperius curse?"

Suddenly, Moody spun and launched a stinging hex at Neville. Neville, though he had often been considered to be a duffer, in actuality had very quick reflexes, and he had snapped off a Protego in time to absorb the stinging hex before it could hit him. Moody had been doing this the entire time they had been taking lessons from him, and they had all become proficient by this time in protecting themselves from his random attacks.

Moody barked out a laugh, and slapped Neville on the back, before stumping to the front of the room, and turning to face the trainees. "Very good. I am proud of you all. But you must remember to practice vigilance. Be certain you know who is around you, and be watchful of your surroundings at all times—even places which are supposed to be 'safe,' such as your common rooms. You can never know who has been turned to the enemy's cause, willingly or not."

The group broke up very soon after Moody's lecture, and they soon found themselves in the manor dining room, eating the lunch provided by the manor house-elves. Their training over for the summer, Hermione could now look forward to returning to Hogwarts for the school year.

She blushed, thinking that she was likely the only one of the group who was actually looking forward to more schooling. Looking around with a critical eye she revised that opinion—Luna, being a Ravenclaw, was likely excited as well, and though she still did not know Fleur as well as she would like, she felt confident that the French witch was quite happy to continue learning. Even Harry seemed somewhat eager to be returning to Hogwarts, though perhaps not as much as in previous years. Of course, that was due to the fact that until this year he had lived with his relatives—from what she knew of them, getting away from them was likely as much a factor in his relief to be returning to Hogwarts as anything else.

Sighing, Hermione turned back to her meal, thinking of all the changes and the new friends she had made. The Weasley twins she had of course known before, and Neville she could now count as a friend, as before he had perhaps been little more than an acquaintance, while being less than a friend. Ginny had fit into a little more of a "casual friend" category, while Fleur, though she was coming to consider a close friend, had been a complete unknown. Even Luna, who Hermione recognized was a diametric opposite to herself, was now treading into that hallowed ground of friendship, regardless of the differences between them.

For Hermione, friends were a treasure to be carefully nurtured and preserved. It came from her rather lonely upbringing, she knew, but the knowledge of how it had come about mattered little—she would do whatever she could to help her friends, and knew that they would do the same.

Frowning, Hermione peered around the room to the assembled training group. In fact, other than the Weasleys, all the others had had a rather solitary upbringing. None of them had had quite the experience Harry had, but each, in their own way, had been lonely as a child. Fleur was set apart by her beauty and heritage, Neville by his fears over his abilities—not to mention his overbearing and protective grandmother—Luna by her nature, while Hermione was set apart by her intelligence. It bound them together in a very real sense, she thought, and made them closer and more loyal to one another as a result. And the four Weasleys were bound to the group by deep ties of friendship, not to mention that Harry had saved one of their number from certain death when he had been merely a boy. These would be her friends, confidants, and fellow soldiers in the years to come. It was a heady feeling.

Appoline Delacour entered the room at that moment, with a smile on her face and some envelopes in her hands. "These arrived while you were in training," she said as she passed the envelopes to Harry, Fleur and Hermione. "I suspect your letters went to your homes," she stated, addressing the other occupants of the room.

Suddenly excited, Hermione tore open her envelope to reveal her Hogwarts letter and booklist for the coming year. It was receiving the long anticipated letter which had always brought home the reality of her imminent return to the school, and the end of the summer. But this time, there was something else in the envelope—something which fell from the ruined parchment and tumbled to the floor, making a tinkling sound as it rolled to a stop.

Curious, Hermione bent down to retrieve the object, her hand trembling slightly as she speculated as to what it could be. She knew as soon as she touched the cool metal with her fingers what it was, the supposition being confirmed by the sight of the shiny metal badge with a large "P" engraved upon its surface. A prefect badge!

"Hermione, you've made prefect?" Harry asked with a delighted smile upon his face.

Nodding, Hermione held up the badge for all to see. A round of congratulations came in from all sides of the room, as Hermione blushed from the praise.

When the tumult had died down, Ron snorted and addressed her. "Oh come now, Hermione, who else would be the Gryffindor prefect? I've known since first year you'd get it."

Hermione glared at him, but her heart was not in it—besides, the grin on his face belied any sting his words might have delivered. "Well, I didn't know, Ronald, and I'm honored that Professor McGonagall has this much confidence in me."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like she was going to pick Lavender 'more-boobs-than-brains' Brown, or Parvati 'there's-no-secret-I-can't-turn-into-gossip' Patil. Besides, our whole house together doesn't even know half the rules you do. It had to be you!"

Laughter erupted in the room, and Hermione's cheeks pinked slightly at Ron's assertions. She directed a mock glare in his direction, but he merely wagged his eyebrows at her and laughed along with the rest of them. Hermione sniffed at him, and turned back to her booklist, making a note of everything she would have to purchase.

"So who's the other Gryffindor prefect?" Luna inquired, glancing pointedly at Harry.

Hermione looked up from her list to see everyone in the room speculating over the three potential candidates.

"Me, of course," Ron stated proudly.

"And how do you reckon that?" Ginny queried with a snort.

"Well, it's like this," Ron began, "Hermione here is a straitlaced rules enforcer, and to balance her out, they need a fun loving, laid-back sort of chap—which I am. Obviously, it has to be me."

Hermione rolled her eyes at her friend and shook her head. Hopefully he was joking. She thought he was joking, anyway.

"Nah, my money's on Harry," George said.

All eyes turned to the black-haired young man. Harry, though seemingly somewhat uncomfortable with everyone watching him, shrugged his shoulders and opened his envelope. Reaching in to its

depths, he produced an identical prefects' badge to Hermione's, and smiled at George. "Should have made that bet, George—you would have won."

Another round of congratulations rang in from around the room, while Hermione darted around the table and hugged him. She was pleased—not only was Harry still her friend, but they would now be working together more closely than ever. Harry truly was a great choice.

One among the company was not as thrilled as the rest. Ron sat back in his chair, a hint of a scowl upon his face as he thought of Harry getting the prefects' badge. It was another example of the Boy-Who-Lived getting something that he did not, and Ron was frankly getting rather tired of it. And Hermione's reaction was a little more... affectionate than Ron liked.

"Ron!" a voice hissed from his side.

Startled, he turned, noting Ginny's glare.

"What?"

"You are not going to do this, Ron. Let go of your jealousy!"

Scowling, Ron turned away from her. "Don't worry, Ginny, I won't say anything."

"Your body language is saying it for you, Ron," Ginny insisted. "Why would you have wanted the badge anyway, Ron? It's not like you truly wanted to enforce the rules and deal with the responsibility of being a prefect, do you? Think of it—the boring meetings, the time you'd need to do patrols, having to obey and enforce the rules. Think about it!"

A little shamefaced, Ron considered Ginny's points, knowing she was right. He did not want to worry about rules and such—he wanted to play Quidditch, play chess, worry about his homework, and have fun. Being a prefect would put a major damper on all that. Better Harry than him.



On the other hand, part of the reason he had wanted to become a prefect was because he would get to spend more time with Hermione. Now, that time was Harry's.

But Harry was his best mate, and he had already told Ron he had no interest in Hermione in that way. Perhaps it was for the best this way—Ron had a good idea of what Hermione's feelings for Harry were, but knew that Harry could not return them. With them both being prefects, they would have time alone, true, but Hermione would learn fairly quickly—if she did not already know—that she could not have a relationship with Harry. Added to that, Harry would be the one with the responsibility, and he would also protect Hermione from others who may fancy her. None of Neville, Seamus, or Dean had ever shown much inclination for her in the past, but she was becoming more fanciable all the time, after all. Better she was with someone who was already taken, then someone who might be sniffing around her.

Besides, Harry was a good bloke, and he deserved to have some good come into his life. So Ron sucked up his pride and extended his hand to his friend, congratulating him for becoming a prefect. Harry's responding smile and thanks was all Ron needed to know that he had made the right choice in being gracious.

## Chapter 10 – Summer's End

If Harry Potter had learned one thing, it was that anything good in his mixed-up life was certain to be balanced—or overbalanced!—by something equally negative. He could not be allowed to be completely happy, now could he? That summer after his fourth year had been by far the best of his life. Regardless of the month at the Dursleys—they had actually left him alone for the most part—regardless of the Dementors and the trial, and regardless of anything else which had happened, he had been happy. Simply put, this summer he had found acceptance, and what he felt was the love and support of a family. But in Harry Potter's strange world, it was unsurprising that the summer should ultimately end on a negative note with news of a toad.

It was the last day of summer before they were to board the express to return to Hogwarts. Neville and Luna had returned to their respective homes the previous evening, promising to see their friends the following day on the express, while the Weasleys had left for the Burrow, though they were to join the Delacour party in Diagon Alley that afternoon to shop for their school supplies.

Harry had left the breakfast room, and was sitting in the main parlor of the ambassador's mansion, thinking of the previous month spent with his new family, and the school year to come. It was amazing how his perception had changed in the short month since the Dementor attack. Before, he had always been excited and eager to return to Hogwarts, whether he had been stuck at Privet Drive until the very end, or had actually managed to escape for some weeks—Hogwarts was the only place he had ever truly been able to call home. However, this year, with the kindness of the Delacours, he was almost sorry to be leaving them behind, though, of course, Fleur would return to Hogwarts with him. Appoline and Gabrielle were kind and a pleasure to be with, while Jean-Sebastian had become the father he had never known. Not even Sirius could claim to be a father figure—Sirius, with his effervescent personality and ability to see the humor in anything, was almost like an older brother. Privately, Harry suspected that Sirius preferred it that way, as he considered himself too young to be a father.

As for the return to Hogwarts, Harry could predict much of what he would be facing this year. Though Fudge had been declawed to a certain extent by the defeat he had suffered at Harry's trial, it was

easy to conclude that the Minister's attacks against both him and Dumbledore would continue. As long as Fudge refused to acknowledge the return of Voldemort, many would believe him, and Harry would be ridiculed for it. It was good to know he had friends and supporters who did believe him and would stand beside him regardless of what happened.

Of course the normal school year events would continue to plague him—from Snape's unreasonable hatred to Malfoy's continual goading, though Harry was much less inclined to cut the mini Death Eater any slack than he had been in the past. The little ferret was a problem which would have to be dealt with sooner, rather than later...

It was during these thoughts that the Floo flared, and the voice of the Headmaster came through the network asking for permission to step through. Having been tutored by Jean-Sebastian, Harry immediately went to the Floo and granted permission to the professor, and stepped back to allow his Headmaster to come through.

"Ah, Harry, just who I wanted to see," greeted Dumbledore when he arrived. "I have some news which will affect us all in the coming year. If you would be so good as to call Jean-Sebastian and your friends, I would appreciate the opportunity to share it with all of you at once."

Harry assented and left the room, his mind already speculating as to what the professor wanted to share. It could be nothing good, he was certain.

It took Harry only a few moments to summon the residents of the manor to the parlor to receive the Headmaster's news. With the departure of the Weasleys and their other friends—as well as Hermione's parents who had only been staying over the weekend—only the family was left in residence, along with Hermione, who would stay until they returned to Hogwarts.

With the entire group gathered, Dumbledore smiled at them and spoke. "I have some news to share with you all, and as it may affect what happens at Hogwarts this year, I decided that I should inform you all in advance. Especially you, Jean-Sebastian," he continued, nodding at the Delacour patriarch, "as you have expressed some concerns regarding the children's schooling to me privately."

Jean-Sebastian appeared stern as he gazed back at Dumbledore, his face almost expressionless. "Your opening statements are not exactly inspiring confidence, Dumbledore. Perhaps you should come to the point?"

Chuckling, Dumbledore nodded his head in assent. "My apologies to you all—sometimes we of the elder generations forget that those younger than us do not like to hear us talk nearly as much as we enjoy the sound of our own voices. The point it is.

"Today I was notified that the Ministry has appointed a professor to fill the ever problematic Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts. Harry and Hermione will certainly be aware that we have not been able to keep a professor in that position for more than a year, a problem with dates back to the late sixties."

"But why, Headmaster?" asked Harry. "It's not as though it's a bad position—I'd think it would be fairly prestigious, to be honest."

"And so it should be, Harry."

"Do you have any indication what is wrong?" Jean-Sebastian interjected. "Surely it cannot be coincidence."

"I do not believe it is coincidence, but unfortunately, I do not have any concrete evidence—only supposition and guesswork, which unfortunately seem to fit the circumstances."

Dumbledore turned to Harry and affixed him with a questioning look. "Harry, unless I misremember, I believe that you previously learned the identity of the dark lord, did you not?"

"Tom Riddle," Harry replied with a nod. "He told me it was an anagram for Voldemort."

"It is indeed," agreed Dumbledore. "So, would it surprise you to learn that Tom applied for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts twice?"

"The dark lord applied to become a professor?" Jean-Sebastian demanded. "Was that before or after he started his campaign of violence?"

"Well before, Jean-Sebastian. Had he come after, I would not have allowed him to escape, I assure you."

Dumbledore's expression became introspective for a few moments, while Harry considered what he had been told. Voldemort as the Defense teacher? He shuddered at the very thought.

"His first application was made during my predecessor's tenure. Headmaster Dippet interviewed him and thanked him for his interest, but told him that he was too young and inexperienced for the position. He asked Tom to return the next time the position was open, after he had had a chance to work in the wizarding world and develop his skills further. I believe at that time Tom, though perhaps not pleased to be refused, accepted the advice and went out to prove himself.

"The second time he applied was not long after I had become Headmaster. By this time he was more than qualified for the position."

"Then why did you not hire him?"

Jean-Sebastian's question hung in the room for a few moments, and though Harry thought he knew the answer, he said nothing. His thoughts were confirmed by Dumbledore's next words.

"I did not hire him because I did not trust him—something about him seemed off to me. I suspect, in hindsight, that by this time he was already well practiced in the dark arts, which was why he seemed to be so qualified—those who employ the dark arts themselves, are uniquely positioned to understand them, after all. I am certain Harry and Hermione remember how effective the Polyjuiced Barty Crouch Jr. was as a teacher."

Harry did not really like recalling the Death Eater and what had happened in his classes, but he nodded tightly to the Headmaster.

"Therefore," Dumbledore said, continuing his narrative, "I thanked Tom again for his interest, but told him I had another candidate with more experience teaching—which was in fact true—and declined to offer him the position. I thought of offering him a different teaching position to keep him at the school and therefore under my

supervision. But again, something about him struck me as wrong, and I ultimately decided that if I could not trust him in one professorship, I could not allow him to influence any of the younger generation in another.

"This time, when he was refused, Riddle was incensed, though he attempted to hide it behind a mask of disappointment. He left and has not set foot in Hogwarts again. However, since that time, I have never been able to keep a Defense professor for more than a single year."

"Are you suggesting he employed a curse, Headmaster?" demanded Hermione. "I've heard of items or locations being cursed, but a position?"

"Very good indeed, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore with a chuckle. "In answer to your question, I suspect that Tom did indeed do just that. The wondrous thing about magic is that if the practitioner is innovative enough, and understands the process and the Arithmancy behind the magic, any existing spell can be modified to do what you wish it to. Magic in general can do almost anything you can imagine, if you can develop the proper manner in which to do it. In fact, I would go so far to say that given the number of cultures in the world which have existed over the millennia, the magics that our society can perform are likely only a fraction of the vast sum of magic which has been developed at one time or another in our race's history. And this does not even mention the other sentient and magical races. Given this, it does not seem so impossible, and if anyone could manage to do something so esoteric as to place a curse on a teaching position, it would be Tom Riddle. He is very intelligent—gifted, even."

"But why? What would he gain from it?" Hermione queried.

"Why does he do anything he does?" was Dumbledore's gentle response. "You may as well ask why you prefer the color blue to the color red. I have no real insight as to the workings of Tom Riddle's mind—even he may not completely understand exactly why he thinks the way he does."

"In this particular instance, however, I suspect that there are at least two factors which play significantly into his actions. The first is simple spite—Tom was a very confident and arrogant student, and

did not take rejection well at all. In that, he has not changed over the years. The other reason was likely to try to weaken our society in general in preparation for his bid for power. Due to the lack of stability in the Defense position, the instruction has not been as good as it should have been. If you look at OWL scores for the past thirty years the average grades in Defense have fallen—in essence, Hogwarts graduates of forty years ago are better able to defend themselves than those graduating today."

"So how do we break the curse?" asked Harry.

"Ah, that is the question, is it not?" was Dumbledore's rhetorical response. "Not knowing exactly how Tom did what he did, the counter-spell would seem to be almost impossible to achieve. However, the easy answer would be to have a professor last for more than one year in the position, thus overcoming the magic of the curse and breaking its hold.

"When Professor Lupin was revealed to be a werewolf at the end of your third year, I tried to persuade him not to resign, reasoning that if this was the curse's way of assuring he not return, the simple matter of his return would break it. Of course, that does not account for the curse potentially using other means to ensure he didn't return. That is neither here nor there, though, as the professor had other—more compelling—reasons to resign. I had intended Professor Moody to be the one to finally break it, but you all know how that turned out. I doubt this year's professor will be any more likely to last more than a single year."

"Which brings us back to our original reason for this discussion, Dumbledore," Jean-Sebastian interjected. "I believe you said the Ministry had assigned you a Defense professor?"

"Ah yes. A lengthy digression, but ultimately a useful one, I believe. The Ministry has indeed assigned a professor for Defense, pulling an old law out of mothballs which dates back some centuries. Essentially, it allows the Ministry to designate a professor if the Headmaster has not been able to fill the position. In this specific case, the inability to keep that position filled, coupled with the Crouch incident from last year has rendered the position unfillable—I received no applicants for Defense this year, and was turned down by everyone I approached."

"What of Auror Moody?" Hermione asked. "Couldn't he actually be the professor this year?"

"With Voldemort's return, unfortunately Alastor has other, more important duties which require his attention."

Jean-Sebastian glared at Dumbledore with a keen look in his eye. "Dumbledore, I doubt this discussion would have been necessary if the Ministry had simply appointed an Auror, for example, to become the Defense professor. Who did they appoint?"

Grimacing, Dumbledore nodded his head in agreement. "You are correct. I would have been happy with many of our Aurors, though any of them would have been a huge loss to the department. However, the Minister did not make even that choice. Unfortunately, he has appointed the Senior Undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge to be the Defense professor."

Though Harry did not immediately recognize the name, it was clear that Jean-Sebastian and Appoline had, if their sudden scowls were any evidence. Harry would have expected Jean-Sebastian to respond, but was surprised when a clearly upset Appoline—who had not yet said anything during the conversation—rounded on Dumbledore.

"Umbridge?" she spat. "That woman is as vile a bigot as I've ever met!"

"I take it you have some experience with the Undersecretary?"

Appoline nodded brusquely. "She was in France a few years ago as a part of a diplomatic delegation, where she made insulting comments about how Veela were creatures which needed to be 'controlled.' If she had her way, all Veela would be locked up and studied, but officially designated as less than human. Tell me why I should allow my daughter to be subjected to the machinations of such a despicable woman?"

Reaching an arm out, Jean-Sebastian pulled his wife into a comforting embrace, while maintaining his scowl at Dumbledore. It was clear that he was just as incensed as his wife.



"Appoline is understandably passionate about this issue, Headmaster, and as our country is home to many Veela, Dolores Umbridge is all but a persona non grata there. Appoline's question is valid. Fleur—and Harry, if the Undersecretary's performance during his trial is any indication—will be a target for her vitriol. Why should we not remove them both from the potential of such persecution, and have them take up their studies at Beauxbatons?"

Dumbledore spread his hands out wide in a gesture of conciliation. "I understand your concerns, and acknowledge that Madam Umbridge is... distasteful in her beliefs. However, I believe you may not be thinking of all the ramifications of pulling your children from Hogwarts."

Jean-Sebastian shared a look with his wife, before he turned back to Dumbledore with narrowed eyes. "Explain."

"Just this—now that the dark lord has returned and has continued to show an unhealthy interest in Harry, it is in Harry's best interests that he be protected. No offense to Madam Maxine, but I do not think Harry would be adequately protected at Beauxbatons. It is largely due to Voldemort's respect for me, that Harry would be safer attending Hogwarts, and by extension, Fleur would also be safer there, as she is now known to have a connection with Mr. Potter, and could be used against him."

"I cannot dispute that," said Jean-Sebastian after a moment. Then a sly look came over his face as he continued, "One might think you are attempting to boast with a statement like that, Dumbledore."

"Certainly not," an amused Dumbledore brushed the comment off, but not without the ever-present twinkling of his eyes. "It is the truth, however—as long as Harry is at Hogwarts while I am there, I do not think Voldemort will attempt anything overt, unless he feels that he will be assured of victory."

"We all know that Harry is Fudge's target," Dumbledore continued candidly. "His failure to discredit Harry during the trial has merely prompted him to change his tactics. However, I believe that I am as much of a target, and that Harry's friends will not be spared either. Therefore, we must make plans to counter the Undersecretary's intentions, and eventually to expose them for what they are, and I will need their help—specifically Harry's—to do that."

"What do I need to do, professor?" Harry asked. He was not about to stand by and listen to the adults discuss the situation—he had been a passive observer far too often in the past, and had ended up acting on impulse at the last moment. He would take a more active role in events.

Dumbledore inclined his head in Harry's direction. "I simply need you to be yourself and to be on your best behavior. During the trial, Umbridge and Fudge attempted to brand you as a troublemaker who seeks to be in the limelight. I do not doubt that Umbridge will attempt to provoke you in some manner; you must resist responding while we work out a way to turn the tables on her and the Minister. Our response will largely be dependant upon Umbridge's actions after you arrive at Hogwarts."

"And what of Fleur?" Appoline demanded. "That woman will take every opportunity to goad and demean Fleur, if she does not openly attack her."

"Mrs. Delacour, I assure you that I will do everything in my power to protect your daughter. I doubt that Madam Umbridge will attempt anything blatant, at least in the short term."

"Maman, I can protect myself," Fleur said, attempting to reassure her mother. "I will have Harry and our other friends with me—she can do nothing."

"You will, Miss Delacour, and I assure you that there is no more loyal friend than Mr. Potter."

Harry blushed immediately at the Headmaster's praise, but he shyly looked at his betrothed and assured her that he would be there for her. Fleur glanced back at him with a large smile upon her face, but she said nothing—for which Harry was grateful.

In an attempt to change the subject—and be relieved from his embarrassment—Harry asked who exactly Umbridge was.

"Do you remember the woman in pink who supported Fudge at your trial?" At Harry's nod, Jean-Sebastian continued. "Dolores Umbridge is a well-known bigot and proponent of anything which she considers helpful in controlling 'creatures.'"

Harry thought for a moment before a thought occurred to him and he allowed a mischievous smile to appear on his face. "She may be vile, but after facing Voldemort himself four times, I hardly think a pudgy, pink, toad woman is anything to be afraid of."

His jest broke the tension in the room, as he had intended, and the company broke into laughter. It was clear that the Delacours—especially Appoline—were still not happy with this development, nor were they pleased with the lack of a concrete plan to counter whatever Umbridge had planned for their children. However, it was also clear that without knowing the precise nature of what the woman wished to accomplish—other than the discrediting of both Dumbledore and Harry, a matter which was now much more difficult due to the thorough routing she and Fudge had experienced at the trial—countering her actions was problematic at best. But, as Hermione pointed out, echoing Dumbledore's earlier words, they would all have the support of the group which had developed over the summer, and that Fleur would have, at the very least, the support of the Weasley twins in Defense class, as they were in the same year. Harry had no doubt that the rest of the Gryffindor seventh years—especially those on the Quidditch team who he knew well—would also accept Fleur with very little hesitation.

At length the discussion wound up and after the Headmaster requested that Harry make sure his friends were aware of the appointment and to be on their best behavior, he departed, leaving Harry once again to his thoughts. He knew that Umbridge was coming to the school to cause trouble for him, but somehow the thought did not bother him. They had had challenges throughout their time at Hogwarts, after all, and they would face and overcome this one as they had all the others.

No, it was his friends—and his betrothed—who caused him greater concern. They would be targets in order to get at him. He was determined to protect them—no one would hurt his friends to get at him!

The day before their return to Hogwarts, Hermione had a visitor.

She had left the breakfast room, and had returned to her own room to mull over the changes this summer had wrought in her relationships, and in the lives of her friends. It had been eventful and,

but for the quick action of her closest friend, and the timely intervention of some adults, the outcome may very well have been tragic. But what was done was done, after all, and she supposed there was no sense in belaboring the issue.

The residents of the manor were due to depart for Diagon Alley that morning to purchase the final supplies for the students' return to school, and Hermione was looking forward to the trip. She knew her friends would tease her for excitement, but she had always enjoyed the excursion—returning to school had always been an exciting time for Hermione, and the opportunity to learn, not to mention the chance to browse through Flourish and Blots and purchase more books, was something which had always given her great pleasure.

Oh yes, she reflected, Harry and Fleur would certainly tease me about my book habits.

Especially Harry, knowing her best out of all her friends as he did, though his teasing would be gentle and playful, not the mean-spirited and spiteful bullying she had endured as a young child. Harry would never hurt her—not intentionally, anyway.

When the knock sounded on the door, she called out permission, and was unsurprised to see Fleur step in through the door. In addition to being intelligent, Hermione was also highly observant, and she had not missed the serious glance Fleur had been directing at her, not only since the announcement of her betrothal had been made, but especially in the past few days. She knew that Fleur would have witnessed the close camaraderie which existed between herself and her best friend, if she had not already heard of their friendship while at Hogwarts the previous year. Hermione had been expecting for some time now to have to reassure her best friend's betrothed of the exact state of their relationship.

Hermione smiled and invited Fleur to seat herself on the edge of the bed. To be honest, Hermione was not certain why the blond witch would be concerned—she was beautiful, after all, and had far more than her share of attributes to keep the attention of any young man. Hermione, though her confidence had been growing, still thought of herself as a mousy little bookworm. What could Fleur possibly have to worry about?

Shaking her head at such thoughts, Hermione concentrated on her friend. They exchanged small talk for several moments, and Hermione noted with amusement Fleur's attempts to keep the conversation light-hearted and friendly. But Hermione had come to know her in the time they had spent together, and was aware that something was bothering her. The French witch, though she generally had good English pronunciation—much better than she had shown at the tournament—had a habit of slipping into a much more noticeable French accent when she was nervous or excited. And as excitement was not evident in her manner, Hermione could only conclude that Fleur was nervous about something.

"Hermione, I wanted to ask you something," Fleur finally said after their conversation had gone on for some moments.

"Of course," was Hermione's answer.

Fleur fidgeted for a moment longer before visibly screwing up her courage and looking Hermione directly in the eye. "I wanted to know more of your relationship with Harry. What are your feelings for Harry?"

Smiling at the fact that she had read her friend so well, Hermione immediately thought to reassure her friend. "Harry and I are the best of friends."

"And?"

"Like I said, Fleur—we are best friends," Hermione repeated, emphasizing the words. "We are extremely close and I would do anything for Harry—I know he'd do anything for me too. But there is nothing more than that. We're completely platonic Fleur—we've always been like siblings."

Fleur actually snorted at that declaration, causing Hermione to narrow her eyes at her friend. But before she could respond, Fleur had already spoken.

"Hermione," she said gently, while reaching over to pat Hermione's hand, "perhaps you are not aware of the specific powers of Veela, but I know that you are not telling me the truth. Whether you are lying to yourself or me matters little—but I want you to truly search

your feelings and be as candid as you possibly can. It is very important.

"Most of the wizarding world considers Veela to be purely sexual beings, but I can tell you that our magic is actually highly in tune with the power of love. I can feel the connection between you and Harry, Hermione, and there is no denying it. Please be truthful."

Throughout Fleur's speech, Hermione felt her horror and mortification building to almost unbearable levels. Fleur knew her secret! How would she ever live it down? How would she even get the other girl to ever trust her again? She knew she was caught—only the truth would get her out of her predicament.

"I do have feelings for Harry," Hermione acknowledged while hanging her head in shame. "I didn't realize it until this summer after he was already betrothed to you, but I do care for him."

"But Fleur," she pleaded, "you have to believe me—I told you that our relationship is completely platonic, and I swear that's all that it has ever been. We have never been anything but the best of friends to each other. Harry has never seen me that way, and I doubt he ever will—I've always been nothing more than a sister to him."

The last was said slightly bitterly as, though Hermione wanted the best for her friend and truly wished to set Fleur's mind at ease, she did wish that Harry could have seen her as more than simply one of the guys.

She was thus startled out of her morose thoughts when Fleur let out a snort, and descended into laughter. "You know," she managed in her mirth, "you English have a saying which fits the situation perfectly: 'Love is blind.'"

"What are you saying?" demanded Hermione with a frown.

Still chuckling to herself, Fleur scooted over on the bed and draped an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Hermione, you are just about the brightest person I have ever known, but when it comes to Harry, you have a blind spot the size of an acromantula. You think Harry will never have any feelings for you? Well I can tell you that he does not see you as merely a sister."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Fleur and pulled away from her. "He's never given any indication of it."

"Teenager? Male? Clueless?"

Fleur's irreverent portrayal of Harry sent Hermione into her own spasm of giggles. She swatted at Fleur while trying to affect a stern expression. "Fleur! Harry's not that bad."

"He's not? He said those very words to me, you know."

That got Hermione's attention. "You asked him about me?"

"Not exactly," Fleur said in a soothing tone. "We were talking about you, but I only asked him why he didn't take you to the Yule Ball if he didn't have a girlfriend and he thought as highly of you as he obviously does. That was his response."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully. "Did he say anything else?"

"He didn't need to, Hermione. I can sense his emotions, whether he admits them to himself or not."

If anything, the confirmation of Harry's feelings—or at least Fleur's assertion of them—was almost more painful than the suspicion of their existence. It made her think of all the time they had spent together in the past, and the attraction which she had felt steadily growing, almost literally since the first time she had met him. She had known to a certain extent that Harry was not comfortable in expressing his emotions, certainly due in part to the way he had been treated by his relatives, but also because he simply was not an overly demonstrative person. Perhaps if she had taken the initiative and shown him how interested she was...

But no—if anything that would have made things even worse. If they had drawn closer in the way she had hoped, the enactment of that marriage contract would have torn him from her, in an even more painful way. Since the announcement, Hermione had done her best to accept the situation as there was nothing she could do about it, but she was never as inclined to curse his betrothal as she was at that moment.

But it was what it was, and there was nothing she could do about it—she would not lose a friend with whom she had become very close, or risk Fleur telling her that she could not see Harry at all any longer. His friendship mattered too much to her for her to consider that, even if she would never be allowed to become anything more to him.

"Be that as it may, it changes nothing," Hermione asserted. "Whatever Harry feels for me, he is far too noble to ever betray you like that. And you have nothing to worry about from me, Fleur. I—"

Hermione's throat constricted and she felt a hitch in her voice and the beginnings of tears forming in her eyes. Ruthlessly she forced herself to regain her composure and face her friend, who she noted was regarding her with a look of compassion.

"I have realized that I have feelings for Harry, much as I would like to deny them. However, I would never dream of interfering in your relationship with him, and I know that you two will do well together. Trust me, Fleur—Harry's heart is so big and you are such a wonderful person, that I have no doubt that he will get over whatever feelings he has for me, and grow to love you in time."

"Thank you, Hermione," said Fleur. "I am truly grateful that I have gained you and Harry for friends—in my past, close friends have been difficult to obtain, much less keep. However, I'd like to take this discussion a little further."

Hermione frowned—Fleur's tone was completely calm, and she did not appear to be angry or even concerned with the fact that a female friend had just admitted to having feelings for her fiancé. What was she thinking?

"I'm not sure there's anything more to talk about."

"Indulge me, please," responded Fleur with a smile. "I'd like to know how much you know about wizarding marriage laws in this country. In fact, customs in the wizarding world are so old-fashioned, that I think you'll find little in the way of difference between the laws of any of the western European countries."



Cautiously, Hermione stared back at her friend. Fleur could not be speaking of the potential for Harry to have multiple wives, could she?

"Hermione," Fleur said with a great deal of affection, "are you aware that Harry is not confined to only me as his wife? He has the ability to take another wife, as long as I approve."

Shocked that she had guessed Fleur's intent, Hermione gaped at her friend. "Fleur!" she stammered. "Are you suggesting...? You would actually consider sharing Harry with someone else?"

She conveniently ignored the fact that Fleur had not only suggested exactly that, but that she had suggested that she would share Harry with her.

"Ah, so you are aware."

"I have heard that, yes," Hermione snapped. "You didn't answer my question."

"Let me guess—it was Ginevra Weasley who told you. Am I right?"

"What does that have to do with it?" demanded Hermione.

"Nothing," Fleur admitted. "But she may as well forget it—if I were to approve of a second wife, it certainly would not be her."

The conversation was going off track, and Hermione was becoming frustrated with her friend. However, drawing upon her admittedly small well of patience, Hermione fixed her eye upon Fleur and defended her other friend.

"Ginny isn't a bad person, Fleur."

"No, but she is a bit of a fan-girl. You, of all people, should know how much Harry hates his fame."

"I do, but Ginny is changing. When we spoke, I told her that she'd best try to be his friend, rather than attempting to be his second wife."

Fleur snorted. "Good advice."

"You still didn't answer my question, Fleur."

"And I still won't," the French witch responded with what Hermione considered to be an absolutely infuriating smirk. "First, though I admit I'm already getting an idea of your opinion on the subject, can you tell me if you would consider sharing Harry with me?"

With narrowed eyes, Hermione glared at Fleur, before deciding that she would have her questions answered a lot more quickly if she gave in.

"To be completely honest, Fleur, I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I mean, if I was enough in love with someone, I suppose it may be possible to share him with someone else, but I can't really say until I was in that position. I was raised to believe that such relationships are wrong, after all.

"Now, will you answer my question?"

The accompanying glare which Hermione directed at Fleur had apparently struck the French witch as amusing, as she started laughing immediately. Still somewhat put out with Fleur, Hermione snapped, "Fleur, can you please be serious?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Fleur said as her giggles faded away, to be replaced with a sober expression which was completely incongruous with her previously jocular attitude. "You must understand that this is difficult for me as well, and I suppose my mirth is my way of dealing with the stress."

Realizing at once that the older witch was not making fun of her, Hermione reached out and patted her hand. "I'm not sure why we're having this conversation in the first place, Fleur. You have just become betrothed to Harry, and you're already trying to find a second wife for him? Perhaps you should try becoming comfortable with him first."

"Perhaps," said Fleur with a sigh. "But everything I sense tells me a different story, Hermione. I believe you have some very deep feelings for Harry, and if I'm right, then separating you—even though the fault belongs to neither of us—would be a mistake."

"But I'm still only fifteen years old, Fleur!" Hermione said with exasperation. "I'm a little young to have found the only man I'll ever love."

Hermione words were filled with sarcasm, and she fully intended to communicate to her friend the fact that she was still young and had plenty of time to find someone else. Unfortunately, the French witch's next words showed that she had not taken them in the way Hermione had intended.

"Perhaps not, Hermione. But there is nothing to say that you haven't found a life long love either. Yes, people develop emotionally and physically as we age, but there is nothing to say that the feelings of love one feels when young aren't as valid as though you had felt those emotions as an adult. Harry has an amazing capacity for love, Hermione, and everything I can sense from you both suggests that you are completely compatible, and already share a great depth of emotion.

"And I should inform you that I'm not the only one who has noted your closeness and compatibility. My mother has noticed as well, and confirms my observations—you and Harry are almost perfectly suited for one another. You would both be fools to throw the possibility of a relationship away."

On one level, Hermione could not believe what her friend was suggesting. Fleur already had Harry sewn up, as it were—they were both bound by the contract her father and Sirius had enacted. Perhaps if she was trying to snare him and knew the only way to gain his interest was as part of a package deal, as it were, this discussion might make a little more sense. But then in that case, Hermione would by default hold the upper hand and would have little incentive to share him with Fleur. Surely there was more to this than Fleur simply believing that Harry and Hermione had feelings for each other.

"Fleur, would you please answer my question now?" Hermione queried. "You have asked me if I'd be willing to share Harry, and the line of discussion seems to suggest that you'd be willing to share him, but I haven't actually heard your feelings on the subject."

Fleur sighed and looked away. "Hermione, you must know that Veela have been prized in the past as mistresses or second wives—it's part of my heritage."

"And you are still avoiding my question," said Hermione with some exasperation. "That is all in the past, Fleur—though, as you pointed out the wizarding world is far behind the Muggle world socially, I'm certain that it has come far enough that you would not have to worry about being forced into that type of relationship. Will you not tell me why you are bringing this up, and what your feelings are on the subject? Do you really want to share Harry with me?"

Though the French witch kept her head bowed as she thought, Hermione could tell that she was considering her answer carefully. She wrung her hands together lightly, shaking her head almost imperceptibly, as the silence wore on. Though she was obviously agitated to a certain extent, Hermione did not interrupt her, knowing that she needed an answer from her friend.

When she finally spoke, her voice was low, but also firm and confident. "To be honest with you, Hermione, I never expected to be in such a situation. I understand the history of my heritage, but I have always intended to find a husband who would love only me, and I him. I think I've found a man I can love. Harry and I are very compatible—in a different way from you and he of course, but compatible nonetheless."

"Then why are we having this conversation?" asked Hermione gently. "You have him, Fleur. By the terms of that contract he is yours! As you said, Harry has a great capacity to love others, and if you're as compatible as you seem to think, he will come to love you in no time. There is no reason for us to even discuss this."

A sigh was Fleur's response. "Perhaps you are right, but there is more at stake here than simply my own desires. Yes, I want to be happy in my life, but I also want Harry to be happy, and I cannot shake the feeling that Harry's happiness depends at least in part on you. You are his first love—his true love. I do not want him to come to resent me for keeping him from you."

Hermione could not help but be touched by Fleur's selflessness and care for Harry. "Fleur, I really don't think Harry would do that, though I am happy that you care for my best friend as much as you do."

"I do care for Harry very much, though I still do not know him well in many respects. However, there is still more at stake than simply Harry's happiness. I assume, given your penchant for research, that you have acquired some knowledge of Veela traits and characteristics."

Blushing, Hermione acknowledged that she had, reflecting somewhat ruefully that her reputation had preceded her—either that or her friend was getting to know her very well already. "But there wasn't a lot of information that I could find in any of my books. I thought I would look for some more information when we go to Flourish and Blots today."

Fleur sniffed in disdain. "Here, the only place you would find any information at all, would be in a book of magical creatures, and even then, it would likely be incomplete or wrong altogether. There is more accurate information available on the continent since there are many more Veela there—especially in France. To save time, I shall tell you.

"Veela are essentially humans with special characteristics, but when we have children we always breed true."

Thinking it through, Hermione considered what she knew of Veela. She had precious little experience with them—limited to Fleur and her sister, and the Veela at the world cup the previous year. And though the information she had been able to find was scarce, she had noted that there was a lack of any mention of male Veela. That would suggest...

"So Veela are always female?" she asked out loud. "And any male children of Veela are just ordinary boys?"

"I thought you would figure it out," said Fleur with a nod of approval. "You are correct—any female children I have will be Veela, while any males will be normal human men, though they likely will be quite attractive.

"However, there is another point that is very important to the present discussion. Veela women have great difficulty getting pregnant—a Veela with more than two children is a rarity, and only one child is

not uncommon. Even more importantly, more than ninety percent of all children born to Veela are girls."

"And Harry is the last of his line..." breathed Hermione, seeing the dilemma immediately.

"Exactly. If I am Harry's only wife, the chances are very good that the name Potter will die with him, which is one of the reasons why I am bringing this up—if he must have a second wife to carry on his name, why not a woman he already loves? If you were to become romantically linked to him in addition to me, there would be less jockeying for position by other ladies looking to snag themselves a piece of the Boy-Who-Lived. Believe me, there are plenty of Pureblood families out there who are not aligned with Voldemort, but who are knowledgeable enough about Veela—or have contacts on the continent who could divulge this information—who would believe that they would benefit by an alliance with House Potter. I doubt Harry could do better than you—you are loyal, brave, incredibly intelligent, and he is obviously attracted to you, not to mention that you know Harry the young man, and do not idolize Harry the legend. I consider you perfect for him, beyond your obvious compatibility."

It all made sense, Hermione had to admit. Fleur's arguments were logical and well thought out, and though she was raised in a non-magical home and therefore did not consider the lack of a male heir to be an issue—she was her parents only child, after all—she did know that in magical society it was a very big deal in many respects.

It all boiled down to whether she could share a husband with another woman; know that a piece of his heart and body was owned by her. Could she do it? At the moment, she knew herself well enough to know that she could not answer that question truthfully—she would need a considerable amount of time to think about such a momentous decision.

Then there was the question of her parents—what would they have to say about her marrying a man who had more than one wife? Her parents were not devout Christians by any means—they tended to be Christmas and Easter Anglicans more than anything else, observing the traditions during those special times, and then ignoring religion for the rest of the year. However, they had been raised in western society where plural marriage was considered to be immoral. She could not truthfully predict what their reaction would

be, but she knew that they would not be completely happy at the very least. Ultimately, they would likely accept it, much as they had finally accepted the fact that she was a witch. Even more frightening was the fact that she had felt herself slipping away from her parents over the years by the simple fact that she was a witch—this was just another thing which would potentially drive the wedge between them even deeper.

"Your arguments do make sense," she said at last, speaking very slowly, while taking her time to think of her words and determine exactly what she wished to say. "I do understand, Fleur, but while part of me wants to jump at the chance, there are things which are holding me back."

Fleur regarded her compassionately, and when she spoke, her voice was very soft and affectionate. "Hermione, I'm not asking you to commit to a lifetime with Harry at this very moment. You are still very young, and it is still very early for you to be making such an important decision in your life.

"But I did not wish to put off the conversation for two reasons: the first, is that I want you to think about it. Regardless of what my senses tell me, there is no guarantee that you and Harry would have decided to be together even if I was not a part of the equation—Veela powers only tell us certain things, and do not give us clairvoyance, or take into account another's free will. My betrothal to Harry obviously complicates a potential romantic relationship with him. I understand your hesitation and want you to have plenty of time to think about it before you make a decision.

"The second reason is that I wanted to prevent you from making a mistake and settling for someone who is wholly unsuited to you in your sorrow over 'losing' Harry. That would make you miserable, and I like you far too much for you to waste your life in that manner."

Though Fleur did not name any names, Hermione knew that she was speaking of Ron and truthfully, she could not say that Fleur was wrong. Hermione truly did like Ron. Most of the time, he was a good and loyal friend, and even when he did allow his jealousy to get the better of him, he could be counted on to come around eventually.

But Hermione also knew that regardless of whatever feelings Ron had for her, a romantic relationship between them would never last.

Their bickering, divergent goals and priorities, and completely opposite personalities would be a recipe for disaster. Fleur's words, if nothing else, further clarified this in her mind—she and Ron as a couple would never happen.

"I understand," was what she said out loud. "I will think about it."

"That is all I can ask."



## Chapter 11 – New Friends and Old Enemies

The Hogwarts Express. To generations of Hogwarts students, the big, red engine had symbolized new beginnings, adventure, and the return to the venerable and distinguished institution, one, which Jean-Sebastian Delacour had to admit, rivaled and surpassed even that of the beloved school of his youth.

There was also, he supposed, a sort of conceited arrogance about the old engine—especially in its location. Hidden away in one of the busiest stations in the country, the platform and the entire line up to the magical town in Scotland was almost a physical manifestation of the wizarding world thumbing its nose at the Muggle world—in essence it was a sneering example of what wizards could do under the very noses of the Muggles, an example of what their magic could accomplish and how there was nothing the Muggles could do to stop them.

In an age where almost instantaneous travel could be initiated by those in the wizarding world, the express was a lasting image to the British magical public, not to mention a leftover anachronism to a world which had largely progressed passed the point of needing it. Beauxbatons, for example, had a large Floo reception area in its main hall where the students would arrive on the first day of classes, and subsequently return home on the days when school was let out. Of course, as it would be inadvisable at best to allow young school students access to an instantaneous method of travelling, the Floo connections were shut down for the bulk of the school year, and all travel through them was heavily supervised by the staff when they were open.

However, knowing as he did the importance of symbols in everyday life, Jean-Sebastian supposed that maintaining the express was a worthwhile endeavor—not all traditions became defunct simply because a better way had been developed. And looking at the excitement on the faces of the assembled students told him that they at least did not consider the express to be redundant.

Of course, the one part of the express with which Jean-Sebastian was not enamored, was the fact that the students spent five hours travelling between London and Hogsmeade with very little supervision outside that of the student leaders themselves. And given what Harry had told him about some of the goings on during

the journey—specifically those involving the confrontations with Malfoy scion which appeared to happen every time they travelled via the express—Jean-Sebastian could not be entirely comfortable.

Still, the children are very capable and responsible, he mused to himself. The Malfoy boy may be a bit of a hothead, but Harry, especially with Fleur's backing, can certainly handle him. The way I understand it, he's been handling the boy for years.

The thought was comforting—Fleur, despite what the British wizards generally thought was her failure at the Tri-Wizard, was a supremely capable and powerful witch. They would have each other—not to mention their friends—to provide support and protection. The power and capacity of a talented, determined and united group of friends could not be underestimated.

As they stepped through the barrier, the three teens made their way to the train and settled their belongings into a compartment before rejoining the three Delacours who were not leaving for Hogwarts—Gabrielle was still a little upset that she would not be accompanying her sister and her hero on their adventure—to say their final goodbyes.

"Neville! Luna!" Harry exclaimed as they stepped down from the train coach.

The two friends arrived and were greeted warmly by the party, though the greetings were a little understated—they had only parted two days earlier, after all.

Once the greetings had been completed, the two new arrivals boarded the train to leave their belongings in the compartment their three friends had already secured.

"Harry, where are the Weasleys?" Fleur suddenly asked, while peering around the platform.

Clearly amused, Hermione and Harry shared a glance. Then Harry looked at his watch—a clearly exaggerated gesture—before returning his gaze to Fleur and meeting her eyes with a look of mischief.

"They should be showing up about ten minutes from now."

Perplexed, Fleur glanced down at her own watch. "But the express will depart in ten minutes."

By now the two best friends were sniggering under their breaths, causing Fleur no small amount of exasperation, Jean-Sebastian noted.

"Fleur, the Weasleys are known for being a little tardy," said Harry between laughs.

"They'll come bustling in just before the train departs," added Hermione. "They do this every year—everyone who has ridden the train since Bill started school knows about them and looks forward to the show."

The three shared a laugh, after which Harry launched into the story of how they arrived at the last moment for his second year, and how he and Ron had found the portal closed to them. But as amusing as the story was, Jean-Sebastian found his mind wandering. As he had already told himself, they were extremely capable young people, but he could not help but worry, especially with Umbridge in residence at the venerable castle. He did not doubt that the woman would seize the first opportunity to spew her vitriol at his eldest daughter.

Jean-Sebastian scowled at the thought—he would have the woman's head if she behaved with anything other than the most professional conduct.

The group's discussions were interrupted by the train's whistle, signaling that the departure was five minutes away. Immediately hugs were exchanged, farewells spoken, and Jean-Sebastian took the opportunity for a last piece of instruction for the departing teens.

"Have a good time at school," he admonished. "And remember—if Umbridge should try anything at all, speak with your Headmaster. You can contact me for anything, and I will give you whatever help you require."

Fleur stepped over to hug him and say her farewells. Jean-Sebastian enveloped her in his arms, reflecting that this was the last time that she would be leaving for school—after this year, she would

have graduated, and be ready to enter the larger adult world. A lump formed in his throat as he retreated to arm's length and gazed into the face of his beautiful daughter.

"I am very proud of you, Fleur," he said through slightly misty eyes.

"Thank you, Papa," was her response.

She paused for a moment before she spoke again. "I want you to know that I am very pleased with my situation, Papa. I was a little upset about the betrothal—since you never even saw fit to inform me of its existence! I was worried it would not work out. But I think it has all been for the best. I think I will be very happy with Harry."

Jean-Sebastian's smile was one of relief. He had wrestled with the decision for some time, not wishing to take his beloved daughter's chance at happiness away, before he had finally determined to enact the marriage contract. The fact that everything he had heard about Harry was positive had been a great relief, as he felt the young man would treat Fleur well. But that did not guarantee her happiness. That she was getting along with the young man so well was exactly what he wished to hear.

"I am glad to hear it," he finally answered. "I too think you will do well together. Just remember to confide in one another; look out for one another—it will draw you closer together, and make your transition even easier."

"We both will, Papa. Harry is very protective of his friends, and I know that he will be watching out for me as much as I will be for him."

Jean-Sebastian separated from his daughter, and once the general goodbyes had been said, the three teenagers boarded the train. Jean-Sebastian was amused as the prediction regarding the Weasleys proved true, as moments before the train began the long journey, the family scurried onto the platform and the four youngest instantly ran for the train. He shared an amused glance with Fleur through the window, as the train gave a lurch, and slowly began to move down the tracks.

"Is it just me, or has this year been the hardest to let go of her?" Appoline asked as they waved farewell to the children.

"It's her last year of school," was Jean-Sebastian's simple reply. "This time next year she will be looking for a job. She's all grown up."

"That makes me feel so old!"

Amused, Jean-Sebastian put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "My dear, you are still every bit as beautiful today as you were the day I first saw you. And we are not so very old yet, you know."

"We are not so very young, either," came the grumpy voice of his wife. "A daughter all grown." She looked down at her younger daughter, who was peering up at her parents with a quizzical expression on her face. "And this little one will be following in her sister's footsteps before long," she continued with a smile and a hug for Gabrielle."

"So she will," Jean-Sebastian agreed, as he steered his wife and daughter from the platform. "But not today."

"How long does it take to get to Hogsmeade, Harry?"

"Five hours, give or take," was Harry's reply.

Harry regarded his new betrothed with a hint of a smile evident on his face. Fleur's demeanor reminded him of himself on his first journey to Hogwarts—excited and thrilled at the new experience, yet with a hint of trepidation at the unknown.

Of course Fleur had been to Hogwarts before—she had spent most of the previous year at the school, after all. However, this was different. It was the first time she had ridden the express, for one thing. Perhaps it was more mundane than the method she had used the previous year—it was difficult to top a journey made in some fancy Cinderella carriage pulled by flying horses—but the journey via the express was a magical experience in its own right. Most importantly, however, she was returning to Hogwarts as a student, not a visitor, and that made all the difference for the young woman.

Harry was well aware of her insecurities—they had talked enough for him to understand them, regardless of the fact that she had never openly declared what was worrying her. But he knew that she

fretted that her experience at Hogwarts would end up much the same way as it had at Beauxbatons: plenty of acquaintances, but no close friends—set apart by what she was.

She need not worry, as Harry was certain nothing could be further from the truth. For starters, Harry would be by her side, and he knew that his friends would accept her for the simple fact that he did. That by itself should be recommendation enough for her to form friendships of her own. In addition, she had already made the acquaintance of several of her fellow students, and the Weasley twins were in her year as well, and should smooth her transition and help her gain acceptance of the others in their year.

The only concern was where she would end up sorted—thus far Professor Dumbledore had not made any mention of how or when she would be sorted. Even so Harry was certain she would end up with him in Gryffindor, though he knew she would do well in Ravenclaw, with her intelligence. Gryffindor, however, made the most sense, as there she would find greater acceptance than anywhere else.

The conversation for the first part of the journey was pleasant and animated. Ron and Ginny had joined them in their compartment, along with Luna and Neville, and though it made for a slightly cramped compartment, the company was good, and none of the friends saw fit to complain. The Weasley twins had stopped in to say hello as the train left, but they immediately left to search for their partner in crime, Lee Jordan, no doubt discussing the mayhem they were likely to create in this their final year at the school. Harry did not doubt that whatever they had in mind, it would not be dull!

About a half hour into the journey, the party was interrupted by the train's loudspeaker.

"Your attention please: All prefects will now assemble in the prefects' car for the prefects' meeting."

As the only two prefects in the compartment, Harry and Hermione immediately grabbed their school robes.

"You know, I've always wondered how the loudspeaker works, when wizards don't know about Muggle electronics, much less the ability

or interest to make them," Harry said absently as he pulled his robes on over his head.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You'd know if you had taken Runes, Harry."

"It's all done with Runes?"

"It's like the lights and other devices you saw at my home, Harry," Fleur chimed in. "The microphone they are using has a modified Sonorus charm which instead of amplifying the sound, transmits it to a set of similar runes in each compartment. Those runes then amplify the sound."

"That's pretty ingenious," said Harry after a moment's thought.

Fleur smiled. "Thank you, Harry. The Muggles do have some marvelous things, but I dare say the magical world has its share of innovations."

"Sounds interesting." Harry then turned to Hermione who was busily tying her hair up in a French braid. "I never knew runes were so versatile. Do you feel like tutoring me this year?"

Startled, Hermione's hands stilled in the middle of her efforts and she peered at him with some disbelief. "You actually want to learn Runes?"

"Yeah mate," Ron chimed in. "Why would you want to torture yourself with more studying, Harry? We're already taking a couple of electives."

"Two electives we chose specifically because we thought they were easy," said Harry with a roll of his eyes.

"And what's wrong with that?" Ron demanded.

"Nothing at all, Ron, if that's what you want to do. For myself, I figure I've skived off a little too much—I've got an insane madman after me, and I doubt he'll want to play Quidditch to the death when we finally meet."

The comment prompted giggles from his companions, though Ron appeared to be alternating between amusement at the thought, and indignation at the way Harry spoke of his favorite sport.

"I think I need to be a little more studious and serious, Ron," said Harry, hoping to avoid offending Ron with his conciliatory words. "Otherwise, I'll never be ready to face him. I know he's coming after me. He won't stop until one of us is gone—of that I am certain."

"And you think Runes is going to help?"

Ron's voice held a certain amount of sarcasm, prompting Harry to consciously hold his temper in. This was Ron, after all, and though he was smart enough and was a good friend, studious he would never be. The important thing right now, was to make certain Ron did not say anything to upset Hermione like he was prone to at times like these—he was working up to a comment about how he preferred that his best friend not become like the resident bookworm, if Harry were to guess.

"Not Runes, specifically," Harry admitted. "But I think a little extra effort in general would be good, and like I said—it sounds interesting."

"Well, how about it?" he continued, turning to Hermione.

Though her expression was suspicious, Hermione appeared pleased at Harry's interest. "Sure Harry, if you'd like."

"I promise, Hermione."

Hermione responded to his grin in like manner before she became all business. "We better go, Harry."

Nodding, Harry followed her from the compartment.

The prefects' meeting was not exactly what Harry would call scintillating—but then again, he supposed it wasn't supposed to be. It was important, however, and Harry paid close attention to the instructions given by the head students—Roger Davies from Ravenclaw, who he remembered was Fleur's date from the Yule Ball, and Samantha Dewhurst, a pretty blond from Hufflepuff. The fact that Hermione was listening intently was not a surprise—Harry fully expected her to take her duties as seriously as she did anything else.



Knowing she expected the same from him, and wanting to live up to his newfound maturity, Harry was determined to emulate her.

Unfortunately, he found upon entering the car that Malfoy had also been made a prefect. It was not exactly a surprise, though, considering just how much Snape favored the blond ponce. He said nothing throughout the whole of the meeting, yet his smirk at both Harry, and sometimes Hermione, seemed to suggest that he knew something which they did not. Harry ignored him—it was either that, or hex the Death Eater spawn to oblivion, and he did not think the head students would appreciate the disruption to their meeting, not to mention the mess to clean up after.

Suppressing a laugh at the image, Harry returned Malfoy's smirk in an even more insolent manner, allowing it to become wider when the other boy's countenance darkened. He then decided he had had enough fun antagonizing the little git, and focused his attention back on the meeting.

As luck would have it, the Gryffindor prefects were assigned the first patrols from junior to senior, meaning that Harry and Hermione would have the first patrol. They left the compartment, ignoring Malfoy's glare, and made their way to the front of the train where they would start their patrol. It too was somewhat uneventful as, other than admonishing a couple of first years to stop horsing around, they could find nothing else wrong. The other students were either too well behaved, or too adept at hiding what they were doing to be caught.

They made their way back to their compartment after their patrol was complete, and the rest of the trip passed uneventfully until they were nearing their destination.

No trip on the express could truly be complete, Harry reflected, without a visit from Malfoy and cronies. This year's version happened during the last ninety minutes of the journey, and as the Slytherins had been assigned the final patrol slots, Harry suspected that the blond git had timed his appearance during his own patrol rounds, so as not to be caught by any of the other prefects, not that any of the other Slytherins would do much more than cheer him on.

Harry had just begun a discussion with Ron about the upcoming Quidditch Cup, when the doors to the compartment snapped open,

and Malfoy walked in, his face stretched in a most unpleasant grin. He was flanked, as always, by his faithful bodyguards. Out in the hallway, Pansy Parkinson looked on with a superior smirk on her face.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Potty and his merry band of misfits," said Malfoy with a sneer.

"Ah, now all is right with the world again," Harry returned. "It wouldn't truly seem right to go all the way to Hogsmeade without a visit from the Ferret and the Gorillas, with the Pug tagging along for good measure. What is this—has the zoo been allowed on the express when I wasn't looking?"

The entire compartment laughed, with the exception of the Slytherins. Crabbe and Goyle appeared confused, while Parkinson and Malfoy flushed in anger, though neither deigned to respond. He only stuck his nose higher in the air. "I certainly couldn't have missed the lot of you—the stench of lesser beings was evident from the moment we entered the car."

Letting out a long-suffering sigh, Harry affixed an unfriendly eye upon the Malfoy heir. "Ferret, did you know that 'Malfoy' in French means bad faith? Do you think that some event in your family's background caused you to be saddled with that unfortunate moniker? Although, I must admit—it does fit you rather well..."

His face almost purple with rage, Malfoy took what he probably thought was a menacing step forward. "You filthy Halfblood! How dare you insult a Pureblood of my standing and pedigree?"

"Ferret, your family was still herding sheep in France when my family had been established as a leading family in England centuries earlier. That's the reason why your criminal father doesn't have a Wizengamot seat—he's still considered an outsider by British Pureblood standards."

Harry smiled at Malfoy's rage, thanking Sirius for his brief lessons on the history of the leading English magical families. Malfoy may not know it, but the only reason his father had any influence at all was because of his money, and the fear his support for Voldemort engendered.

It was truly amusing to see the little git stew in his own juices, his mouth working ineffectually, but Harry was becoming rather tired of the confrontation and wanted to enjoy the rest of the trip in peace. "You know, Bad Faith," Harry continued conversationally after a few moments, "every year you strut in here like you own the place, leading these two brainless baboons around by the nose, and every year you end up fleeing the scene with your tail between your legs. Why don't you do us both a favor, save yourself whatever dignity you may have left, and leave now before you're humiliated yet again?"

The color of Malfoy's face reminded Harry of Uncle Vernon in full rage. He surprised Harry, however, by maintaining his temper and sneering once again.

"You know, Potty, I know you're nothing more than a Halfblood, but I didn't think even you could stoop this low. I mean, it's bad enough that you lower yourself to associating with Mudbloods," he gestured disdainfully at Hermione, "and squibs, but Delacour? That whore isn't even human!"

Incensed did not even begin to cover Harry's emotions. He sprang up from his seat and shot off two body binds in rapid succession, locking up Crabbe and Goyle. The bookends fell to the floor before they even knew what hit them. Another quick spell disarmed the Slytherin, while another slammed the door behind Malfoy closed, and all before Malfoy could even think to reach for his wand. Then Harry grabbed Malfoy by the front of his shirt and slammed him up against the door, his forearm pressed against the boy's throat, a grim frown on his face.

"You don't seem to understand me, Bad Faith," Harry ground out, "so I suppose I'll have to be explicit. I'm not interested in your bigoted beliefs, or your whiny inferiority complex, nor am I interested in continually being baited by you. I'm not going to put up with your garbage this year, Ferret—if you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from me and all my friends."

Malfoy's eyes blazed and he struggled against Harry's grip, but Harry had all the leverage and would not give him any room to move.

"When my father hears—" he rasped, until Harry cut him off.

"And that is why I have no respect for you, Ferret. The first sign of trouble and you go running for Daddy. Perhaps some time you should learn to fight your own battles. Or perhaps this is something they teach in Death Eater School? Do all of daddy's cronies go running to Voldemort when the going gets rough?"

Calling on all his disdain and disgust for the inbred twit, Harry pulled out his best impression of the elder Malfoy's cultured voice. "How dare you defy me? When the Dork Lord hears of this..."

Ignoring the laughter from the rest of the group, Harry focused his attention on Malfoy, noting the almost purple hue of his face, though whether that was due to anger or the pressure on his throat, Harry could not be certain. "Just remember, Bad Faith, you've never managed to beat me and you never will. You're welcome to try, though, any time you like."

A quick swish of his wand, and the door sprang open, spilling the Malfoy heir into the hallway where he collided with Parkinson, who had been banging on the door, demanding alternately that Harry release Draco, and that he open the door. The almost comic look of disbelief on her face when she went down with Malfoy sprawled on top of her was priceless. A couple of levitation charms later, and all four Slytherins had been dumped in the hallway in a tangle of limbs. Harry then shut the door, locking it behind him, while he pulled the shade to give them some privacy.

Predictably, it was Ron who spoke first. "Mate, that was bloody brilliant!"

Chuckling, Harry acknowledged his friend with a grin, before turning to the rest of them, with a more serious demeanor. "I meant what I said—that little prick better stay away from us this year. If he tries anything, hex first and ask questions later."

"But Harry, you could get into trouble for that," Hermione responded. "It's not that he doesn't deserve it, but do you really want to run the risk of getting detention or worse?"

"This coming from the girl who bloodied his nose in third year?" asked Harry rhetorically. Hermione blushed at the reference, though he thought he detected a small smirk as well.

Surprisingly it was Neville who answered for the entire group. "Hermione, the reason Malfoy gets away with as much as he does is because there are no consequences for his behavior. Snape ignores his actions, and Malfoy is clever enough that he hides them when any of the other teachers are around. If he starts feeling the consequences of his actions from those he is trying to bully, then maybe he'll think twice before doing it again."

"Exactly, Neville," Harry said, saluting the other boy. "Though I doubt Malfoy is smart enough to understand enough to leave us alone, I say we practice Moody's mantra—constant vigilance. But we also need to remember not to allow the enemy to get the upper hand. Don't start anything, but if he does start something, make certain you finish it."

A general agreement met his declaration, though Hermione's was perhaps a little subdued. Seeing this, Harry sat down next to her.

"I don't intend to start a fight with him, Hermione," he said softly. "But I will not allow him to continue to insult my friends or my betrothed."

He glanced up at Fleur and smiled at her, which she returned. "For my part, Harry, I agree. He'll just get worse the older he gets if you don't teach him that he can't get away with it."

"All right, Harry," Hermione finally agreed. "But don't go looking for trouble."

Harry allowed an injured frown to come over his face. "I? Go looking for trouble? Hermione, you wound me."

The general laughter in the car once again dispelled the serious mood, and the friends returned to their light-hearted banter, until the announcement of their arrival.

Fleur had initially pushed back when her friends suggested she would be as wide-eyed as a first year upon going to Hogwarts this year, making it plain to all her friends, that it was not as though she had never before been to Hogwarts.

What she had not counted on, however, was the fact that the famed old castle was well able to surprise and awe virtually anyone,

especially one who was entering it for the first time as an actual member of its student population. From the station, and the long train ride, to the carriages which they boarded to journey to the castle, everything felt far more magical to Fleur than she felt it should have, being, as she was, as seventh year student on the cusp of adulthood.

But there was nothing to be done—she found herself impressed all over at the grandeur of it all, and excited for the coming year, much to the amusement of her companions.

Exiting the station, the group of friends stepped down from the platform and made their way to the waiting carriages which would take them the final distance to their destination. While they were waiting in queue, however, her fiancé stared ahead at the gathered carriages, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"What are those things pulling the carriages?"

Almost as one, the group followed his gaze. Confused, Fleur glanced back at her betrothed—there was nothing in front of the carriages. They appeared to be propelled by some sort of magic.

"There's nothing in front of the carriages, Harry," Hermione told her friend gently.

"Yes there are, Hermione," Harry disagreed. "They look like big scaly horses, with wings folded along their backs."

"Oh, those are thestrals," the voice of Luna Lovegood piped up.

Now, in the time that they had spent training and associating with one another, the group had become intimately familiar with Luna, and her odd ways. Her proclamations regarding fantastical creatures such as Nargles, Nifflers, and Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, among others, were well-known to the group. And though they truly liked her and had quickly come to consider her a good friend, her pronouncements were still somewhat confusing—at times, they did not truly know how to take the little blond.

"What are you on about, Luna?" Ron demanded. "There's nothing there."

Luna turned her gaze upon Ron—more focused than was her wont, Fleur noted—and chided him. "Just because you cannot see them, Ronald, doesn't mean that they don't exist. Thestrals are invisible to all but those who have seen death."

"Then that means since I saw Cedric die at the third task last year..." Harry's voice trailed off as he was clearly remembering the events of that horrible night.

Fleur reached out and took his hand, imparting what comfort she was able, while Luna addressed Harry.

"Yes, Harry—that would qualify. Cedric was such a nice boy..."

"Then why can you see them, Luna?" Neville asked.

"My mother died when I was nine," responded the girl. "I was there."

"I'm sorry to hear that," was Neville's response, as he reached out to take her hand. Luna smiled up at him, but she did not remove her hand from his.

The group waited in silence until they boarded the carriages, Fleur's thoughts centered upon her betrothed. Harry had not spoken much of the night he had seen Cedric die, but she knew that it still had the power to affect him. As they entered the carriage, she took up position to Harry's right, never letting go of his hand, while Hermione bracketed her friend on the other side. Fleur raised a knowing eyebrow at her friend, which Hermione ignored, before Neville, Ron and Luna entered and took their positions on the other seat. Fleur noted idly that Neville and Luna had not released each other's hands.

The mood lifted, however, as they approached the castle, and Fleur, still excited as she was, peered forward, eager to catch a first glimpse at the famous building. Harry favored her with an indulgent smile, but Fleur was too excited to do more than return it somewhat breathlessly.

"Maybe Fleur should have ridden in the boats with the firsties," Ron commented with a grin.

"And why is that, Mr. Weasley?" asked Fleur with an uplifted eyebrow.

"The boats carry first years to an underground grotto where they wait for the sorting," Harry explained. "The boats are kind of cool, but the most spectacular thing is the first sight of the castle as you round the point on the lake. I've never seen anything so awe-inspiring in my entire life."

"Then I'm sorry I've missed it."

"That should be our goal for this year, then," said Neville. "We'll build a boat and sail her round the head at dusk so Fleur can see the castle from the lake."

As the friends laughed, Fleur looked archly at the young man. "Thank you, Neville, but I think part of the mystique is the first glimpse of the castle. I have already seen it, after all."

"True enough," said Hermione. "Still, it's worth seeing if you get the chance."

The carriage stopped in front of the castle and the six friends debarked, meeting up with their friends who had ridden in different carriages. As a group they strode into the entrance hall, making their way through the milling mass of students.

At one point Fleur noticed the blond Slytherin from earlier staring at them with some displeasure, but he made no comment, merely pointedly turning his back on them with an exaggerated flourish.

"Looks like something I said may have finally penetrated through Malfoy's rock-hard skull."

Fleur glanced questioningly at Harry. He pointed toward a tall man with dark hair and black robes who was currently glaring at them with some disdain.

"In previous years Malfoy would have gone directly to Snape with tales of how I mistreated him. But with Snape just standing there, I guess he hasn't—maybe he wants to turn over a new leaf and start living up to his potential of a bully who doesn't go running to daddy or his head of house at the first sign of trouble."



"Oh Harry," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes, "don't even joke about something like that. Malfoy is bad enough the way he is—he'd be ten times worse if he actually grew a backbone and acquired some competence."

Harry chuckled and winked at her, while Fleur merely smiled. She had seen Malfoy in action and could not help but agree with their assessment of the boy. And as for Snape, she had already been warned many times over by members of the entire group. She expected nothing less from the man than the treatment with which he routinely subjected Harry. However, with her father as a protector this year, Snape had better watch his behavior—Jean-Sebastian Delacour was not one to put up with the kind of nonsense for which the man was infamous.

The group moved further into the hall, and had reached the massive doors to the great hall when they were stopped by the diminutive charms professor Fleur remembered from the previous year.

"Miss Delacour, welcome to Hogwarts!"

"Thank you, professor, I am happy to be here."

"And I am certain that Hogwarts is happy to have stolen such a bright and talented witch from our counterparts in Beauxbatons. You will be a credit to our school, to be sure."

He leaned close and conspiratorially, but in a stage whisper, said, "I know perhaps you are hoping to be sorted in the same house as your betrothed, you should consider the house of the intelligent—we would be pleased to have you join us."

"Are you attempting to influence a prospective student, professor?" asked Hermione with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Professor Flitwick ginned at her. "Certainly not, Miss Granger, though now that you mention it, I believe there is another present who should have ended up in my house."

"Oh no, professor," Luna chimed in. "I think Hermione ending up in Gryffindor was for the best."

"You are probably right at that," Flitwick replied with a sigh. "But that doesn't stop me from wishing it were different."

"In any case, my errand here is not a social one," he continued. "I have been instructed by the Headmaster to convey Miss Delacour to his office for her sorting—he feels there is no need to make a spectacle of your sorting in front of the entire school."

"Yes sir," Fleur agreed, before turning to her companions. "Harry, Hermione, will you come with me also? If that is acceptable, professor."

"No problem at all, Miss Delacour—I'm sure the support will be more than welcome."

"We'll take her there, professor," stated Harry. "I'm sure we know the way."

Flitwick laughed. "I'm sure you do, Mr. Potter. In that case, I will resume my normal duties. Please hurry along, as we do not wish to delay the sorting of the first years."

With that, Flitwick departed. Harry turned to the rest of the group.

"Please save us places—we'll be back shortly."

As the group nodded and departed, Fleur noted that no one called Harry on his assumption that she would be sitting at Gryffindor table with the rest of them. Perhaps it was because she would be sitting with him regardless of whether she was sorted in the same house or not.

The trip up to the Headmaster's office was accomplished in silence, and when they arrived, the gargoyle guarding the door immediately moved to the side and allowed them to step on the revolving stair. They had soon reached the top, and entered through the open door, to find Dumbledore sitting behind his desk, with Professor McGonagall perched on one of the chairs to the side.

"Ah, Miss Delacour," greeted the Headmaster. He gestured to a chair situated directly in front of his desk. "Please have a seat and we will begin."

"And as for you, Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore with a barely concealed smirk, "I suppose you felt you had to accompany your betrothed to ensure she was sorted in the proper place?"

"Of course, Headmaster," said Harry with an answering grin. "I wouldn't want my fiancée to have to live with the snakes, after all."

The Headmaster chuckled, while McGonagall looked on with amusement. But it was a ratty old hat sitting on the Headmaster's desk that responded.

"That will be quite enough, Mr. Potter," said the hat. "Just because you had a bad experience with a future Slytherin and didn't want to be sorted into that house, doesn't mean you control me. Miss Delacour will be placed in the house in which she would be most suited, I assure you, regardless of your juvenile wishes."

Fleur gaped at Harry with astonishment. Not only was she surprised at the sight of her betrothed being chastised by a hat, but the fact that it had almost played him in Slytherin of all places was a revelation! She regarded Harry, noting that Hermione had an identical expression of shock on her face.

Harry shrugged and grinned cheekily. "What can I say? I met Malfoy on the train and didn't want to be anywhere near him. I asked the hat not to put me in Slytherin, and given what I have to put up with from the little prick ever since then, it was the right choice."

"Mr. Potter!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall, though to Fleur's eyes she did not appear to be overly scandalized.

At the same time, the hat snorted with some exasperation. "I still say you could have aspired to greatness in Slytherin, though I will admit that it was a tossup between Slytherin and Gryffindor. I suppose you have done well there too."

"Thanks." Harry's response was more than a little sarcastic.

"Though this is perhaps a most interesting discussion," interjected the Headmaster, "we should move on to what are here for."

Indicating her readiness, Fleur waited while McGonagall, receiving a nod from Headmaster Dumbledore, retrieved the hat and placed it upon her head. Suddenly, Fleur felt a presence in her mind.

It is a pleasure to finally be able to sit upon your head, Miss Delacour.

Fleur laughed. I'm not sure what I expected, but I don't think it was this.

Well, how could I have come to know your strongest characteristics if I was unable to see in your mind and communicate with you? Should I instead sort you based on the color of your hair, or perhaps you should just tell me where you want to go—would we save time that way, do you think? It worked for Mr. Potter, after all.

You're rather sarcastic for a hat.

The hat gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. My creator patterned my after his own personality, and Godric was as sarcastic as anyone I've ever met. I have developed my own brand of cynicism, though—it comes from sitting on the heads of every snot-nosed eleven year-old to come through this institution for the past thousand years.

I can see how that would affect you, Fleur responded politely.

I'm sure you can. In fact, I must say it is rather refreshing to be perched on the head of someone a little more mature. I can certainly do without all the pubescent hormones, emotional uncertainty, and the perpetual angst of the unknown which exists in the minds of most of those upon whose heads I have been perched. Now, shall we have a look and place you in your proper house?

Though speaking with the hat was amusing, its particular brand of sarcastic cynicism was beginning to grate on her. Please.

The hat went silent for a moment, before it began musing to itself in her head. Most intriguing. I see you have an impressive intelligence, more than enough to see you in the house of Ravenclaw, though perhaps it is not your defining characteristic. You do have some ambition, though again not as strong as some of your other traits. Regardless, that particular house would obviously not accept you, so the point is moot. You are loyal in the right circumstances,

so Hufflepuff is a possibility. However... Ah yes, you have courage aplenty, not only to stand up for who you are, but for the trials you've faced in your life. Then, at the second task, though you were terrified, you faced your fears and competed. For that alone, you would do well in...

"Gryffindor!"

Removing the hat from her head, Fleur smiled and thanked both of the professors. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled in response.

"Well, Minerva?"

"Nothing more than I expected, Albus," replied the professor, a little smugly, Fleur thought. "In fact, I believe I should have made that wager with you."

"I think not," responded Dumbledore. "I believe I would have known better than to accept a wager of that kind."

McGonagall laughed then turned to face Fleur, a bright smile adorning her face. "And let me welcome you to Gryffindor, Miss Delacour! I trust you will be a welcome addition to the house, and will fit in with all your friends."

"Thank you professor," responded Fleur, somewhat embarrassed at the praise. "I will do my best to become a credit to the house."

"And I am sure you will," responded the deputy Headmistress. "However, I believe that we have a sorting ceremony to attend, and I would not wish to keep you all from your friends for any longer than is necessary. Let us go to the Great Hall now, shall we?"

The rest of the evening was somewhat of a blur for Fleur. Though the sorting proceeded in apace, she could not say who was sorted where, other than that her new house had received the most students—almost twenty in number. Not that the other houses were ignored—far from it, in fact. Harry gave her to understand that this group of first years was by far the largest he had seen in his time at the venerable institution.

The one thing which was quite clear in her mind when she thought about it later, was what happened immediately after the

Headmaster's opening remarks and introductions. And if she had not already felt a rather large measure of distaste for the pink-clad woman sitting primly at the head table, looking down her nose at the assembled students—though Fleur privately thought the woman had sneered in the direction of their group more often than anywhere else—the woman's words would have provoked her dislike.

Upon her introduction, Madam Umbridge stood and after usurping the Headmaster's position, proceeded to address the assembly.

"Students of Hogwarts, I thank you for the most gracious welcome you have given me. Indeed, I feel at home already amongst you all in this ancient institution."

The members of their group all exchanged smirks with one another. If the woman truly considered the silent stares a warm welcome, then she was either witless or blind, not to mention deaf.

"My name is Delores Umbridge," she continued, "and I have the very great honor to be serving as your Defense Against the Dark Arts professor this year. I hope we shall accomplish many great things together in the days ahead."

The woman stopped for a moment and gaze up at the ceiling, apparently deep in thought.

"The Ministry has become very concerned about the standard of education taught at this august establishment in recent years," she continued slowly, once her period of introspection had passed. "I am here to ensure the standards of instruction improve, but also to ensure you are taught the proper information which will allow you to succeed, without overwhelming you. I trust this will benefit you not only at Hogwarts, but also in your future life."

"But make no mistake—I intend to see that Hogwarts improves so that its graduates meet their potential. As a part of this, I have come to the understanding that certain... students," here she directed a simpering glance in Harry's direction, "have received preferential treatment. I assure you that every student in this school is—and is to be considered—equal, by all of the professors."

She once again flashed her insipid and insincere smile at the students. "Again, thank you, and I look forward to working with you all!"

The students were dismissed soon after Umbridge's statements, and though Harry and Hermione were busy directing the new first year students to Gryffindor tower, Fleur walked with the rest of their friends in the wake of the wide-eyed new students.

"Is she for real?" said Ron, voicing the thought Fleur suspected they were all thinking.

"For real or not, it's going to be an interesting year," said Neville ruefully.

"Is it any different from usual?" said one of the twins.

"Yeah, ever since Harry got here, every year has been interesting," said the other.

Fleur simply took all this in stride, while gazing around at the castle. It was the first time she had been up to the Gryffindor dorms and though she was not unfamiliar with Hogwarts, she was not certain she would be able to find her way again.

The common room was garishly decorated in red and gold (in Fleur's opinion anyway), but exuded a warm, comfortable feeling despite being rather hard on the eyes. She was introduced to some of the other students, particularly the seventh years, and though she was warmly accepted by the twins' friend, Lee Jordan, she felt the typical reserve from the ladies. Even the three Gryffindor chasers appeared to be somewhat wary of her, even though they clearly had nothing but respect and affection for Harry. She knew that for the time being, until she proved herself, she was been accepted based on the recommendations of the members of their little group. And it was partially her fault, she suspected—they had likely seen her aloof act at the tournament and equated her with the spoiled and arrogant princess she showed to keep the world at bay.

Still, it was much better than the almost blatant hostility she received from many of the other girls at Beauxbatons. With time—not to mention the girls' eventual understanding that she would not be attempting to steal any prospective boyfriends, not with Harry having

already claimed her—she was sure they would become easier in each other's company. In all, she was happy with her first day at school. There would undoubtedly be challenges, but they would stick together and overcome them.



## Chapter 12 – Of Bats and Toads

The school year beginning in September 1995 was an oddity in that September the first was a Friday. As such, after the welcoming feast and the first night in the castle, the next two days fell on the weekend and first classes did not begin until Monday. That did not mean the days were uneventful—in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

As Angelina had been made the Quidditch captain that year, she had decided that she wanted to get the team squared away as soon as possible, so they could get down to practicing. This was her one chance to win the Quidditch Cup as the team's captain—as she would graduate the next June—and she wanted to make certain that she did everything in her power to ensure that Gryffindor prevailed. The one problem the Gryffindor Quidditch team would face that year was the loss of their keeper, Oliver Wood, who, it was rumored, was trying out for a professional team. Therefore, the position would need to be filled. If Wood's replacement was even marginally competent, Angelina felt her squad had a very good shot at winning the cup again this year, as the rest of the team was returning and had won the cup two years earlier, the previous year being cancelled due to the Tri Wizard tournament.

Therefore, on the day after the feast, the hopefuls of Gryffindor house all trooped down to the Quidditch pitch for the anticipated tryouts, and though everyone knew there was only one starting spot available, Angelina had insisted on there being fair tryouts for all positions, regardless of how long they had been on the team, or how secure their position was considered.

Of course, the tryouts went almost exactly as expected. Fred and George Weasley were clearly the class of those who tried out and were named the team's beaters, while Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet along with Angelina Johnson were the team's chasers. The three girls had played together so long, it seemed almost uncanny how well in tune they were with each other. Of course, Harry's position as seeker was secure, though an arrogant sixth year by the name of Cormac McLaggen had been bragging all the way to the pitch of how he would take Harry's spot from him. But no one in the school could out fly Harry, and he caught the snitch in every trial. McLaggen was not best pleased, but he left the pitch in a huff once it became apparent he would not be making good on his boasts.

The final position was taken by Ron Weasley. Ron had dreamed of the day when he would be able to make the Quidditch team since long before arriving at Hogwarts, and though the trial was somewhat anticlimactic—he was the only one to try out for the spot—he performed competently and was named the starting keeper.

The one true surprise, however, was the reserve team. The usual suspects, such as Ginny Weasley and Dean Thomas, were again made reserves, but the fact that Fleur Delacour had also tried out and made the team as a reserve chaser, induced many raised eyebrows. It had all come about due to a discussion several days before the start of school. Fleur, fretting over the coming school year and her history of not having close friends, had asked her friends about her year mates. It was then that Harry had suggested trying out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, conveniently ignoring the possibility that she could be placed in any other house. Though initially skeptical, Fleur had agreed when Harry told her that Angelina and Alicia were crazy about Quidditch, and the surest way to gain their respect would be to attempt to show an interest in their pursuits.

As for Fleur herself, she was very clear to Harry that while she was not crazy about Quidditch as a sport, she was at least interested enough to go to the games to see him play, and cheer the team on, even if she did not make the team. In that respect, she was very much like Hermione. She did make the team however, as she was a very good flyer, and though she had not played Quidditch as a student at Beauxbatons, she was at least familiar with the game.

And it turned out that Harry's advice was almost prophetic in nature. Angelina had praised Fleur's flying ability and her determination, and a bridge had been built between Fleur and the three chasers. And though perhaps she could not at this point consider the three girls close friends, she could at least consider them strong acquaintances. Time spent together would do the rest. It was a heady realization for a young woman who had largely been lonely throughout her school experience.

Another thing of note, that weekend, was the behavior of one Ron Weasley, which raised some eyebrows, not to mention provoking some smirks and muted laughter at times. Simply put, Ron had decided it was time to seriously woo his chosen love, and though he

was earnest and sincere, his efforts were at times so blatantly obvious that a blind man could see them.

The twins—who knew what he was about, given the fact that they had gifted him with the book—sat back to enjoy the show for the most part, poking fun at their brother whenever they got the chance. For his part, Harry stayed well clear of the torturous mating ritual, knowing that Ron's short temper would be ignited if he suspected his closest friend was not only aware of his attempts, but found them vastly amusing.

As for the recipient of Ron's attempts at courtship, Hermione found herself more embarrassed than anything else. She was flattered that he felt that way about her—she truly was—but the more she thought about her conversation with Fleur, the more she understood that the French witch was absolutely correct in her assessment of the situation. She and Ron were not compatible, and she had no interest in dating him.

The problem, of course, was how to tell Ron in a manner which would not only not hurt his feelings, but induce him to accept the situation with grace. She attempted to indicate to him gently that she did not return his feelings, but he either misread her attempts, or blatantly ignored them. After a few days of this, Hermione finally decided that the best way to handle the situation would be to wait for him to finally come to the point and let him down gently. Now all she had to do was to endure his attentions until he decided to do so.

As for her other topic of conversation with Fleur, Hermione had firmly decided that to enter into a relationship with Harry when he was already involved with Fleur was not a decision she could make on the spur of the moment. There were so many things to consider: her feelings—which were as strong as they had ever been—her parents' reactions, whether she could actually share her husband, to name a few. It would take much thought before she felt she could even begin to determine what she wanted to do. For the time being, she resolved to think about it, while intimating to Fleur that she was considering it, and would appreciate some time to do so. Fleur, who truly liked Hermione, was quick to assure her friend that she would not press her. Of course, Harry remained blissfully ignorant of the situation.

While Harry had been happy to return to Hogwarts for his fifth year, the first day of classes—and indeed every succeeding Monday—was not exactly something to be anticipated. Not only did Monday start out with History—the most boring class in existence, in Harry's opinion—but it was followed up with a double potions class with Slytherin, and then Defense after lunch with the newly appointed Umbridge. Potions was always fun with Snape at the helm, especially when Gryffindor was paired with Slytherin, but Defense, which had always been a favorite of Harry's, now promised to be just as trying.

Therefore, following the History class—a class in which Harry had actually managed to stay conscious, despite the inducement to catch up on his sleep—Harry and his friends made their way toward the dungeons, wondering what the Slytherin potions' master had in store for them this year.

"Harry, you need to relax," Hermione said from his side. "Potions isn't all that bad."

"Speak for yourself, Hermione," Neville said somewhat morosely. "You aren't Snape's favorite chew toy."

Turning to look at her friend, Hermione tried to cheer the young man. "You just need to follow the instructions, Neville. The problems you've had in the past are because you did something in the wrong order."

Neville snorted. "That would be good advice, but Snape hovers around and I get flustered. I think he does it on purpose."

"Don't be ridiculous, Neville," responded Hermione, somewhat primly it was to be admitted.

"You know he does, Hermione," interjected Harry. "The plonker has a vendetta against me and Neville—you know he does."

"Neville and me, Harry," said Hermione offhandedly, to which Harry grinned and winked at Neville.

Hermione completely missed the exchange, however, as she appeared to be deep in thought. And although she appeared as though she wanted to refute his claim, years of experiencing the

professor's treatment of Harry suggested otherwise, and Hermione was certainly smart enough to see it. The man was a professional—that could not be denied. He was acknowledged as a true master of the subject of potions, and Harry could never detect any deficiency in his knowledge. In addition, he was also a competent teacher, relating and instructing the students with a flair which could be infectious, if the man himself was not so personally distasteful.

The major problem with him was the fact that although he was a professional, he did not act in a professional manner, allowing his dislike for any not of his own house, and a few in particular, color his interpersonal relationships with his students. In truth, the man was a bit of a bully.

"I've had a few choice words from him myself," interjected Ron.

Hermione sighed. "He is a little... strict."

"Hermione, I could stand strict," said Harry. "It's the unfairness, the bullying and the outright intimidation I don't particularly like. The man is skilled, no doubt about it, but he's still a child in the way he acts. I'll bet you he wouldn't act that way if my parents were alive."

"You're right, Harry," Hermione said. "But you'd better stop talking. We're here now."

"Well, the Snape-free summer was nice while it lasted."

They entered the classroom to discover the potions' master still blessedly absent—in fact, only a few of the Slytherins had arrived. Taking a seat near the middle of the classroom, Harry suppressed a smile when Hermione sat down next to him, prompting a glare from Ron, and then pulled his textbook from his backpack and arranged his things on his desk in preparation for class. He knew from experience, after all, that being ready for the beginning of the day's lecture would earn him a small measure of grudging respect from Snape. At the very least it gave the man one less thing to complain about.

For the few minutes before the other students began to file in, the four friends spoke in low voices, about potions and school, but Defense in particular. Harry had already made certain to pass Jean-Sebastian's warning about Umbridge on the express, but the

specifics of what the woman would be attempting were still unknown. They had made an agreement, therefore, to support one another and ensure she was given no reason to make an example of them, regardless of how difficult she made it for them in class.

A few moments before the beginning of class, Malfoy walked into the room and took their seats at the very back of the class. In the two days since the confrontation on the train, Harry had seen the Malfoy scion several times, but every time the blond twit had declined to bait his favorite target, making Harry hope that he had finally been able to get through to the ponce. Unfortunately, the moment Draco entered the room, Harry's hope was dashed.

"Hey Scarhead, congratulations on your engagement."

Harry ignored him—as long as he said nothing against Fleur, the little bigot could spout whatever he liked.

"Good thing he landed a betrothal," Parkinson sneered. "No one would have him otherwise."

Harry just laughed at Pansy's stupidity—if anything, the unwanted fame of being the Boy-Who-Lived made it easy for him to find a girlfriend, if all he wanted was a shallow relationship with a girl who wanted nothing more than his fame.

"It seems like even the bollicking I gave you on the express hasn't managed to knock some sense into your empty head, Bad Faith."

"And as for you, Parkinson," he continued, fixing the girl with a glare, "even a betrothal contract wouldn't be enough to get you attached. Your family would have to pay someone to take you off their hands, and even then they would have to throw a bag over your pug face."

Parkinson colored and looked to be gathering a retort, when Draco threw himself back into the fray. "I hear you're claiming that the Dark Lord is back. Has he come after you yet? I bet you're crying in your bed at night wondering when he will finally show up teach you a lesson."

"And I've heard that he hasn't been able to go anywhere," countered Harry with an evil smirk. "The scuttlebutt is that your lips have been magically attached to his arse all summer."

Furious, Malfoy grabbed his wand and directed a hex at Harry. But Harry, who had been expecting this from the Slytherin, blocked it easily and hit him in the chest with a stinging hex of his own, causing the blond to yelp in pain. The Gryffindors laughed at the ponce's girly squeak, while the rest of the Slytherins looked on, for the most part impassively.

Of course, Snape chose that exact moment to enter the classroom.

"Potter!" he yelled. "That will be five points and detention for hexing a classmate."

"Don't look now," Harry whispered to Hermione, "but His Lugubriousness has arrived."

Hermione let out a soft giggle at Harry's quip, an action which was covered nicely by Ron's protestations.

"What about Malfoy?" Ron demanded. "He started it and threw the first curse."

Snape turned his dark glare on the redhead. "Perhaps you'd like to join your friend in detention for lying, Weasley?"

"He wasn't lying, sir," Neville said in a rare show of backbone in front of his nemesis.

Snape regarded Neville as though he was an insect. "I only saw Potter's actions. Any further discussion on this subject will result in more points and detentions."

Harry said nothing, content with sitting back in his chair and glaring at a now smirking Malfoy. He reviewed the confrontation, noting the attempt to get a rise out of him by the Slytherins. He did not know if it had been planned from the start, though he doubted that Snape would conspire with a group of students to hand out a detention to another, not when he was so gifted at managing it all himself. But if Harry had to guess, he thought that Snape had probably been waiting outside the classroom door—waiting for an opportunity, knowing the mutual hatred which existed between the two boys. He would have to think about it further, and figure out a way to turn the tables on the Slytherins.

The rest of potions class went much the same as it usually did. Harry, by virtue of being Hermione's lab partner—not to mention his newfound dedication to his studies—was able to brew the potion assigned. He was even able to induce Snape to pronounce the potion "acceptable," though he was certain the professor would almost rather have gouged out his own eyes than praise the son of his enemy. Hermione's potion was, as usual, impeccable. Even Ron and Neville were able to gain acceptable grades for the day's work, though their potions were not exactly the right shade Snape had expected.

As they left the potions laboratory, Harry made it a point to ignore the Slytherins who were still heckling him as he walked from the classroom, his mind still working over the problem of Snape and his unprofessional attitude.

"Harry," Hermione said gently, "you really should know better than to respond to Malfoy. Can't you just ignore him like you're doing now?"

"Do you suppose he waited outside the classroom to try to catch me doing something?"

"Doesn't he always?" was Ron's pessimistic statement.

Expecting Hermione to scoff at his suggestion, Harry was surprised when she thought about it before responding. "He does seem to have near perfect timing, doesn't he?"

"That and he's a bigoted, unprofessional, childish git, who can't see past the fact that I'm James Potter's son," groused Harry.

"You seemed to take the fact that he assigned you a detention rather calmly."

"He's done it before and he'll do it again," was Harry's shrugged response. "The more I protest, the worse it gets, so why bother?"

"But it's not right!"

"Tell it to Snape," said Harry, and with a grin he put his arm around her shoulders, ignoring Ron's dark look at his actions. "Look, Hermione, you're right about allowing Malfoy to provoke me into a



response. We promised Jean-Sebastian that we wouldn't let Umbridge trick us into doing something she could use against us, and I go and let Draco do the same. I'll have to apply that same principle to Malfoy and Snape."

The look Hermione gave him was proud, and a little mischievous. "That's a rather mature attitude, Harry. I didn't think you had it in you."

Harry waggled his eyebrows, provoking a laugh from his friend. "Maybe it is. I guess we all have to grow up at some time."

"All right you two, what's so funny?" Ron demanded, hurrying up to them.

It was all Harry could do not to roll his eyes—even after informing Ron that he had no designs on Hermione, the redhead still regarded them with suspicion when they so much as glanced at one another. He should know better, as they had behaved in this manner practically since the first day they had become friends. Really, Harry wished Ron would just settle down—he would have a much better chance with Hermione if he was not so tense and jealous of her interactions.

"We were just talking about how to deal with Snape and Malfoy," said Hermione, while disengaging herself from Harry's arm. The apologetic sidelong glance at Harry nearly prompted his laughter in response. He did manage to control himself, but it was a near thing.

Ron turned and looked at Harry. "What, you're going to banish them through a wall? Or maybe hexing their bits off?"

"Nah, I'll just ignore them. That's what Jean-Sebastian told us to do with Umbridge—why shouldn't it work for the bat and the ferret?"

Though Ron looked a little dubious—simply ignoring Malfoy had never actually been on the table before. He said nothing though, and the foursome entered the Great Hall for lunch.

They found Fleur sitting with the twins and the chasers halfway down the Gryffindor table and sat beside them, Harry sitting next to Fleur with Hermione on his other side. The talk turned to the morning's classes—the seventh years had begun the year with

charms—and though the twins pressed them, knowing they had had potions that morning, Harry brushed them off, saying it had been just another potions class. It was a sad fact that Harry spoke nothing but the truth—unfortunately, Snape's behavior that morning had not been anything out of the ordinary.

That afternoon, their Monday continued with the dreaded with the Ministry-appointed Umbridge. Though the class had not yet started, a sense of foreboding had settled over the joint Hufflepuff/Gryffindor class.

It was perhaps ridiculous, Hermione thought to herself, considering the fact that none of them knew the woman personally, and most of the class had little clue of what to expect from her. Even her words on the night of the feast had contained very little real information as to how she would run the class that year, and had said nothing of her teaching methods.

Of course, the textbook they had been assigned was not the best—it was vague and contained relatively little information, especially considering this was an OWL year. But again, that in and of itself did not account for the nervousness Hermione felt from her classmates.

Regardless, the nervousness was present, perhaps to a greater degree than it had been even during first year—firsties are nervous about everything—and fourth year, when an unpredictable, yet decorated Auror had been contracted to instruct at the school. The fact that Voldemort's return had been publicized, though completely denied by the current Minister, added to the atmosphere, but Hermione had to attribute the uncertainty to the fact that Umbridge was known as a vehement supporter of the Minister, and a cruel detractor of anything not Pureblood.

As the bell sounded, the door to the woman's office opened, and she stepped through, directing a sweet smile—which was patently false—at the assembled students. Hermione snorted inwardly—the woman herself certainly projected no overt threat. How could she? Unless one's greatest fear was short, pudgy women, dressed tastelessly from head to toe in pink, she could hardly intimidate. In fact, she reminded Hermione more of a pink care bear than a Defense Professor.

"Hem, hem, welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts class," she simpered once she had reached the desk at the front of the room. "I thank you all for coming to class on time. I trust you are all ready to learn as you never have before!"

Privately, Hermione had to suppress the urge to gape at the woman as though she was stupid—it was an OWL year, after all. Why would they show up if not to learn? To her side, she thought she sensed Harry suppressing a snicker, but when she glanced at him his face was placid and controlled. A thrill of affection raced through her, and she considered the events of the summer and how he had grown and matured since fourth year. The old Harry would likely already have started becoming impatient with the woman and her prattle.

Umbridge scanned the room, her eyes coming to a stop on Harry for the briefest of moments before moving on, and though her expression did not change, Hermione could almost sense the malevolence hidden below the surface. She hoped that Harry would be able to continue to control his temper as this woman would almost certainly test it.

"Well now, class, I understand your education to be somewhat fractured in this class, is that not so? We at the Ministry are well aware of the fact that not one professor has lasted for more than one year for some time now."

When the class grumbled their assent, the woman smiled and continued. "This year shall be different. The best minds at the Ministry have toiled over the summer months to determine a curriculum which will not only provide you with the best education, but will do so in a safe, Ministry sanctioned environment. As such, I will share with you the goals for this course for the coming year."

At a wave of her wand, a short list appeared on the blackboard.

1. Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.
2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.
3. Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

Though Hermione wondered exactly what the woman was up to, she dutifully copied the points down on her parchment, along with the other members of the class.

"Now, I presume everyone has a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?" said Umbridge once the scratching of quills had ceased.

A murmured assent met her query, to which she frowned. "Perhaps your previous professors ran their classes in a lackadaisical manner, but when I went to school, we raised our hands when we wished to speak in class, and when the professor asks a question we respond, 'Yes, Professor Umbridge,' or 'No, Professor Umbridge.' Now, shall we try that again?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," the class intoned, and though Hermione could definitely detect a certain mocking quality from several quarters, it seemed to satisfy the professor.

"Much better. Now, if you will all open to chapter one, let us jump right into the material."

The material was dry. In fact, it was worse than dry. Even Hermione, who had never had trouble staying awake in History of Magic—though perhaps she was the only one—found the text to be almost hypnotizing. The author, though perhaps possessing a certain competent knowledge of defensive magic, had obviously never actually cast such a spell in his life, as the text was littered with theory, conjecture, and anecdotal accounts of possible uses of defensive spells. In short, as Hermione had expected, the material seemed useless.

Umbridge ran the class much as Hermione remember from her second grade in the local primary school. Anyone who wished to speak was required to raise their hand, and Umbridge demanded that she be referred to as "Professor Umbridge." The level of formality was not so much the issue, as that was how she generally referred to all of her professors. It was more that Umbridge seemed to be trying to stamp her authority on the class, and not only because she was teaching it.

Underneath it all, Umbridge seemed to be watching the class with an almost ferocious glee. She clearly expected someone to say

something about the text, and the way she gazed at Harry suggested that she expected it to be him. Harry, however, merely read along with the rest of the class and contributed his not inconsiderable knowledge to the conversation at the appropriate times, though he never offered an answer without prompting. The times he did speak, it was due to Umbridge calling on him, hoping, Hermione, suspected, to obtain a rise out of him.

Hermione, knowing that she was not the target that Harry was, decided it was up to her to poke at the woman a little in an attempt to discover exactly what she was up to. At a short pause in the discussion, Hermione raised her hand, speaking once Umbridge had acknowledged her with a sickly sweet smile.

"I'm just wondering," said Hermione in as diffident a manner as she could manage. "This theory is... interesting, but in previous years we would already have begun practicing the material by now. When will we get to that?"

Umbridge's smile was patronizing and her answer even more so. "My dear child, surely the subject is interesting enough that you are not already dissatisfied?"

"No, Professor. I am merely inquiring as to when we will be allowed to use what we are studying."

Umbridge let out an exasperated sigh. "Are you a Ministry accredited instructor, Miss...?"

"Granger," Hermione answered. "And no I am not. I'm just wondering—that's all."

Though Umbridge looked suspicious, she merely answered the question with the same condescension as she had showed earlier. "Well then, the answer is very simple, Miss Granger. We will not actually be casting spells in this class, as it is unnecessary."

The faces around the room darkened at the implication.

"But Professor, isn't practical application in Defense the most important aspect?" queried Susan Bones.

Hermione did not truly know Susan—as a Hufflepuff she tended to keep to herself and fly under the radar, as many Hufflepuffs did. However, what she knew of the girl suggested that she was intelligent and hardworking, and perhaps most importantly, protected. Her aunt was the director of the DMLE, after all, and Hermione doubted Umbridge would incur the wrath of the DMLE head unless Susan truly did something to merit punishment.

"You could injure yourself using these spells, Miss Bones."

"Wouldn't we be more injured if a dark curse actually hit us because we have not practiced the proper counter?" demanded Ron.

Umbridge turned her sickly smile on Ron. "Now where could you possibly come into contact with a dark curse, Mr. Weasley? Do you not think our institution is safe?"

Harry and Hermione shared an amused look—given what had happened every year of their education at Hogwarts, a very strong case could be made that it was most certainly not safe. However, pointing that out to Umbridge would likely prompt her anger in return, so the friends kept silent.

"Oh the school is safe," replied Ron, though perhaps only a few of his closest friends caught the irony in his voice. "But what happens if I am attacked in Diagon Alley?"

"Then you should call in the Aurors, Mr. Weasley. Is that not what they are there for?"

"To apprehend criminals, perhaps," said Susan Bones, a hint of steel in her voice, "but the Aurors cannot be everywhere at once. If you wait for Aurors to arrive on the scene, you may be dead already."

"What an imagination you have, Miss Bones. I assure you that Diagon Alley—and any other wizarding area—is completely safe. There is no need to fear."

"Pardon me, Professor, but that is not what my aunt says. She has told me on multiple occasions that she has far too few Aurors to properly protect the populace, and that it is every citizen's right and

responsibility to protect themselves. We all carry a deadly weapon on us at all times, after all."

A flash of annoyance spread over Umbridge's face, but she masked it in an instant. Clearly, the woman was upset that the niece of the DMLE head had torn her arguments apart so effortlessly.

"A deadly weapon? What fanciful nonsense are you speaking?"

"A wand," Harry's voice rang out through the room.

"Pardon me Mr. Potter?"

Harry gazed at the woman with the placid look he had adopted since she had entered the room plastered across his face. "The weapon Susan referred to, Professor, is a wand. Each of us carries with us a tool which is capable of bludgeoning, stinging, cutting, causing a person to itch, regurgitate slugs, and a whole host of other unpleasant things. And given what the fake Professor Moody demonstrated last year, it can also be used to torture, kill, and force someone to do what you want them to do."

"And are you planning on committing such nefarious deeds, Mr. Potter?"

Hermione almost chuckled at the stupidity of the question, and wondered if Umbridge truly expected Harry to respond incorrectly. Did she truly consider him an imbecile? The woman was about as subtle as a bludger.

"Of course not, Professor," replied Harry. "I'm merely pointing out some of the things which are theoretically possible with a tool which we all carry on our persons at all times."

Umbridge shook her head, her visage sorrowful. "And that is what I am speaking of. Obviously your experiences last year with your Defense professor have skewed your views. You should not consider your wand to be a weapon—only hooligans and misfits would think in such a manner. Rather, you should think of it as a tool which can be used to perform amazing feats of magic."

"Oh, I do, Professor," said Harry.

It was again clear from the almost constipated expression of disappointment she sported, that Harry's brief and concise answer irritated Umbridge. She was sent to the school to attempt to marginalize Harry—and likely Dumbledore—that much was certain. But she was obviously having difficulty determining exactly how to go about accomplishing this mission, given the fact that Harry was not behaving as she had expected him to. Hermione was proud of Harry all over again—Hermione did not know what the toad had planned, but Harry certainly was not making it easy for her.

"But Professor," Parvati Patil chimed in with a perky and seemingly innocent enthusiasm, "you just said there was no danger in the magical world. Shouldn't that suggest that there are no 'hooligans' and 'misfits?'"

The entire class had to stifle their laughter at such blatant baiting of the professor. And though Umbridge's eyes narrowed for a moment, her sickly sweet smile never left her face.

"Please put your hand up if you wish to speak, Miss Patil. I will not have this class degenerate into a group of rowdies all clamoring for attention.

"In answer to your question, I did say that the wizarding world is safe, but I also said that if you stumble into a dangerous situation, you should allow the Aurors to handle it. They are the professionals, after all."

Hermione could almost hear the rolling of eyes at Umbridge's statement. The woman must truly consider them to be nothing more than eight year-old children, if she expected them to be taken in by her blatant obfuscation.

"But Professor," Dean Thomas chimed in, "it's our OWL year. How are we supposed to pass our practical exams if we don't practice the spells?"

"Raise your hand, Mr. Thomas!" Umbridge squealed.

Dean raised his hand and waved it around in an exaggerated manner, repeating his question once Umbridge had motioned for him to do so.



"There will be enough theoretical knowledge in the course of the year, that when it comes time for you to take the practical portion of your exam, you should have no problems."

"So we'll need to cast the spells in an examination situation, without ever having performed them before?" demanded Justin Finch-Fletchley, who had until that moment remained silent.

"Is that a problem?"

"Casting a spell without practice?" said Ron. "It sure is!"

Murmurs of agreement echoed from all sides of the room.

"It usually takes some practice time before I can properly cast a spell, and I'm not the only one," Ron continued. "Not all of us can be Harry Potter, after all."

A gleam entered Umbridge's eye as she turned her attention on Harry. Knowing Harry as she did, Hermione guessed that Harry would like to smack Ron upside the head for unnecessarily drawing attention to him.

"We can't all be Mr. Potter, is it? I must admit that I was unaware of the presence of a prodigy in our midst."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not a prodigy, Professor. I'm just a student trying to study my hardest, get the best grades, and have a little fun at school."

"Don't let him fool you," Dean spoke up. "Harry's better at defense than all the rest of us put together."

"Don't give him a bigger head than he already has," Seamus said in a stage whisper, accompanied by a glare at Harry. He had not been overt, but since they had returned for classes, Seamus had seemed a little colder to Harry than he had been in the past

"Hand, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Finnegan," Umbridge said absently, while still gazing at Harry. "Is this so, Mr. Potter?"

Harry's answering gaze was calm and implacable. "I don't know about that, Professor Umbridge—I don't really want to get into

bragging about myself, you understand. Defense is my best subject, and I usually pick up the spells quite quickly, but I'm sure there are others who do as well."

"And did you pick up last year's lessons as well as you normally do?"

Harry paused and looked up, while cupping his hand in his chin, in apparent thought. "Well, of course we didn't try to cast the Unforgivables—I guess that's a line that not even Barty Crouch Jr. would dare to cross. But whatever you say about the man, he was an effective teacher—I suppose it was because of the fact that he was so familiar with the dark arts himself, being a previous follower of the Dark Lord and all."

All of Umbridge's affected sweetness was by now completely missing from her manner. The way her eyes were fixed on Harry, Hermione suspected that if she could pierce him through with just her gaze, Harry would be bleeding on the floor even now. However, even she could not take exception to what he said.

"A Dark Lord you claim has returned, if I recall correctly, Mr. Potter."

Hermione held her breath—Umbridge was now not only openly baiting Harry, she was obviously attempting to get him to lose his temper by insinuating that he was either lying or delusional about Voldemort's return. With the Minister's insistence that the Dark Lord could not have returned, it was clear to see what she hoped to accomplish.

"I've told my story, Professor Umbridge, and I see no reason to continue to discuss it. Obviously, given your faith in Minister Fudge and Madam Bones, they are handling the situation—as a mere student, I don't see that it's my place to become involved any further."

"There is no situation to be handled, Mr. Potter, as the Dark Lord has not returned."

"Then I have nothing to worry about," replied Harry with a shrug.

She continued to stare at Harry with a hint of consternation entering into her eyes. It was but a moment, however, before she once again resumed her veneer of sweetness.

"If you are as good as the rest of the class seems to think, then you should have no problem with the Defense OWL exam."

"I don't rightly know, Professor," responded Harry with a genial smile. "We've only just begun the year, and this is just the first class."

Harry's smile became brighter and Hermione thought she could detect a hint of deviousness in his eyes. "If you would like me to provide an assessment of your class once the year is complete, I'd be happy to do so, but I don't think I could do so now with so little practical experience."

Umbridge's eyes widened in surprise. Obviously she had not expected an answer from him, and the concept of a student rating a teacher was not something which was normally done in the magical world. However, Umbridge merely looked away and returned to her desk, her disappointment palpable.

"If the interruptions are finished, I believe we should return to the lesson. I trust you all still have your books open?"

The rest of the class passed in the same manner the first part had, with sections of the book read to the class while the professor expounded on certain points. Her observations were insipid, and downright stupid on some cases, while in others, she merely restated exactly what the book said, with the words merely rearranged to give her the appearance of expanding upon the subject. In other words, the woman had proved beyond a doubt her lack of any detailed knowledge, and just exactly how little use her class would be in preparing them for their OWL exams. With a useless text and a useless professor, this class would perhaps be even worse than Lockhart's class.

What Hermione could not decide was what to do about it. Could they have Professor Moody come and tutor them to get some practical application? But that would almost certainly draw the attention—and the ire—of the esteemed toad-woman, who would almost certainly object, not to mention giving her some ammunition to proceed with

whatever plans still percolated in her ugly head. It was a dilemma to be certain, and one which would require some thought.

At length, the class was dismissed. The four friends filed from the room and out in the hallway, pausing for a brief moment to let the Hufflepuffs and the rest of the Gryffindors to clear the area.

"Can you believe that woman?" Neville began in an undertone.

"I'm more concerned about Harry," said Hermione. "I'm proud of you, Harry—you ignored her insults and kept your temper."

Harry shrugged and then grinned at her. "I won't say I wasn't tempted. But she's so full of it that I figured it was a waste of my time to play her game."

"Good on you, mate," said Ron, stepping forward and putting his arm around Hermione's shoulders.

Hermione was just able to keep herself from rolling her eyes at him before she disengaged his arm from her shoulders with a gentle twist. Speaking of blatant, Ron had been getting more and more obvious since they had arrived at school. It was not difficult to keep him at bay, but it was a little annoying.

"It's no big deal," said Harry. "I appreciate your support, but in the end, it's just like Jean-Sebastian said—she's just not worth the effort."

"I'll tell you this, though," he continued with more than a little steel in his voice. "If all she does is try to get me to respond, I can handle her. But I won't take, or allow my friends to take any abuse from her or anyone else, just like I told Malfoy."

The boys murmured their agreement to his sentiments, and they set off for Gryffindor tower. Hermione was of two minds about Harry's declaration. On the one hand, she knew that they all need to stand up for one another, and push back against the bullies. However, Umbridge truly was not worth it, and Harry would only get himself into hot water with her if he pushed back.

But then again, he would not be Harry if he just lay down and took whatever Umbridge dished out. He was far too noble for that.

It was later that evening when the friends were gathered in the Gryffindor common room. Fleur was sitting beside Harry, with Hermione on her other side, while Ron tried to get as close as possible to Hermione in a nearby armchair. Neville and the twins sat on the other side of a table from them, and the chasers were all close by. Nominally the group was glancing over their respective school work and textbooks for the next day. In reality, however, there was very little studying actually occurring. The group was more engrossed in discussing the day's events than anything else.

When the older students heard what had happened in Defense, there was some groaning and moaning about having to put up with that woman for a whole year. However, there was an equal amount of smirks for the way that Harry had dealt with her.

Fleur's true interest, however, was captured when the account of the morning's potions class was shared. Harry, though in truth he still despised Snape as much as the sentiment was returned by the greasy bat, treated the episode as though it were nothing more than a joke. And to him it was—he had been dealing with it since he started at Hogwarts.

Fleur, however, did not see it in quite that manner.

"Is this the way the potions professor normally behaves?" Her voice was flinty and her expression hard.

"Don't worry, Fleur, I've learned to deal with Snape."

Throwing her hands up in the air with some exasperation, Fleur glared at him. "That's not the point, Harry. A professor has an obligation to the students he teaches. He must be fair, teach his subject in a manner which can be understood, help those who require additional help, and ultimately, to guide his students through their studies so that they succeed. It sounds to me like Snape is a pretty poor teacher."

Hermione sighed. "Actually, Snape is a good teacher. He understands potions, and has a flair for explaining how different ingredients work together to create the proper effect."

"Yeah, but too bad he's such a failure as a human being," said Harry with a snort.

"Are you the only one he picks on?"

Harry shared a glance with Neville. "He favors his own house without a doubt. It's always seemed to me that he singles Neville and me out more often than not."

"Do you know why?"

"As for me, it's probably because I'm pants at potions," said Neville with a certain note of dejection in his voice.

"Have you ever attempted to make a potion without that bully standing over you?"

An embarrassed Neville just shrugged his shoulders in response.

"And you, Harry?"

Leaning back on the sofa, Harry thought about it for several moments. Fleur did have a point about Neville's performance, and he knew that though he himself would never be a master at potion making, his new confidence induced by a loving family had given him a sense of determination to do better, something which would likely affect his potions making skills.

Even more than the aspect of his potion making, Harry found that he truly liked this side of Fleur which he had never seen before. Not only did she exude a righteous anger, and a sense of determination for a cause, but he also found it made her already stunning beauty somehow more enticing.

"In my case, it has to do more with my parents, than with me, I think," Harry responded at length. "Sirius told me that my Dad and Snape were rivals at school, and that their rivalry sometimes got out of hand. As for my Mum, apparently she and Snape were close friends before coming to Hogwarts. But they drifted apart over the years, and Snape blamed my father for their estrangement."

"So, a professor, at what is widely considered to be the premier magical school in Europe—if not the world—essentially picks on three quarters of the student population, and singles out certain students for 'special treatment.' This is bullying, Harry, but normally

a student would only have to worry about bullying from other students, not from their teachers."

Harry nodded his head with the others—what Fleur had said was only the truth.

"Have you appealed the detention and points?"

Harry merely looked blankly at her, while Hermione started and peered at her with some surprise.

"Appealed?" queried Hermione. "You can do that?"

Fleur rolled her eyes. "Of course you can. Surely you have such a process in the Muggle school system as well?"

"Well, yes, but..." Hermione trailed off.

Knowing what Hermione was thinking, Harry understood her reluctance to speak. It was known—even by many Purebloods, who had never had any interaction whatsoever with the Muggle world—that socially, the magical world was many decades behind their Muggle counterparts. However, it was one thing to understand it, and quite another to have it pointed out to you.

Luckily, either Fleur did not understand Hermione's reticence, or she chose the simple expedient of ignoring it. "Hermione, I would be very surprised if there was not an appeals process at Hogwarts. There is certainly one at Beauxbatons, and though house system and house points do not exist there, I still have seen it used to protest detentions, or even essay results. There must be something similar at Hogwarts."

"I've never heard of one," Angelina chimed in.

Many of the other students who had been listening to the conversation murmured in agreement. It was a general consensus that had such a process been known, that it would have been used before then to protest Snape's treatment of Gryffindors in general.

Thoughtful, Harry wondered if such a process did exist, and if so, if it could be used to get the greasy bat off of his back. It was certainly worth a try.

"All right," he finally said, responding to Fleur's unspoken question. "I'll go to Dumbledore tomorrow and talk to him about what happened in potions today."

A bright smile met his declaration. "A good choice, Harry. I will go with you. If Dumbledore refuses to do anything, we can always involve my father."

Harry frowned. "I'm not sure we need to call your father, Fleur. Like I said, I've handled Snape for the past four years—I'm sure I can continue to do so."

"But you don't need to, nor should you be required to," said Fleur with an affectionate pat on his hand. "Snape undermines the entire educational process when he behaves like a bully, and a generation of Hogwarts students has not had the potions experience they should have had due to his actions. That needs to be corrected."

"And besides, you now have my family to help look out for you. You don't need to do it all yourself."

This was at the crux of the issue, Harry mused. He had always been required to be self sufficient and make certain he looked out for himself—the Dursleys certainly could never be bothered to have his best interests at heart. Even after he had arrived at Hogwarts and made friends who would look out for him, it had not been the same as having a parent to watch over him. Rather than feel smothered like he would have expected, Harry found that he liked the sensation. It felt good to know he was no longer alone.



## Chapter 13 – Appeals and Reprimands

Fleur Delacour, filled with righteous anger, turned out to be a revelation for Harry. Not only did it make her even more enticing than she already was, as he had previously noted, but it also revealed a whole new facet of his betrothed which he had never known existed. The affection and respect he felt for her deepened because of it.

Though he had promised her the day before that he would talk to Dumbledore about Snape's behavior, she apparently harbored enough doubt about his intentions—or more about his tendency to try to deal with everything on his own, as she informed him—that Harry arrived in the common room the following morning, and was greeted by the sight of Fleur waiting impatiently on a nearby sofa. By her side sat Hermione, who appeared to be slightly in awe of Fleur, who was obviously still incensed by Snape's actions. Upon seeing him, Fleur rose and greeted him with a perfunctory, "Good morning, Harry," before grasping his hand, beckoning Hermione to accompany them, and essentially frog-marching them out of Gryffindor common room.

It had been Hermione who had pointed out—quite correctly—that courtesy, as well as proper procedure, dictated that their first appeal should be made to their head of house, rather than directly to the Headmaster. And while Fleur was clearly eager for an accounting from the Headmaster as to why this situation had been allowed to persist, she had grudgingly agreed with Hermione's assessment. Therefore, to Professor McGonagall's office they were to go.

On the way to their destination, Harry's thoughts led him to his new understanding of several of Fleur's traits, as she admitted to having herself. The first was that Fleur was a rather patient witch, one who would put up with quite a bit before truly becoming angry. However, when that anger was released, it was rarely a mild display, and more often resembled a spectacular pyroclastic explosion. She was a passionate witch, and for that fact, Harry could only be thankful; life with her would never be dull.

However, he had also learned that Fleur was particularly intolerant of bullies, gossipers, and those who looked for ways to enjoy the misfortune of others. This was due, she freely admitted, to the treatment she had often received as a young Veela attending school,

and the prejudice to which she had been subjected all her life. A sure-fire way to completely bypass her normally long fuse was to expose her to someone behaving in the manner which Snape had done—her patience generally evaporated quite quickly in such cases.

Another thing which he had known for a time, but which had been abundantly displayed only recently, is that Fleur was fiercely protective of anyone she deemed part of her family. It appeared that Harry—and perhaps somewhat surprisingly Hermione—now fitted into that category. Since their return to school, Harry had found that Seamus Finnegan, with whom he had roomed for the entire first four years of his schooling, had been quiet and withdrawn where Harry was concerned, though he had been as he ever was with everyone else. A chance remark a few evenings earlier had betrayed the fact that he now believed the Ministry in their smear campaign against Harry, and was suspicious of Harry's complicity in the matter of Cedric's death.

Harry, true to form, had been more than willing to let his dorm mate believe whatever he liked, but he had not counted on Fleur's protective streak. The French witch had eyed Seamus with some distaste, before she proceeded to tell him in pointed and sometimes insulting fashion, exactly how stupid she considered him to be in believing the Prophet's slander. Her observations had not been brief either—it had finally been Seamus's rather petulant and quick departure which had served to halt her diatribe.

In light of her character and sense of right, it was clear that nothing would interfere with her demands for justice for Harry and Neville, and she had vowed to her companions that morning, that if Dumbledore was not prepared to rein the potions master in, then she would have no choice but to involve her father. And knowing Jean-Sebastian and his own tenacity, involving him would likely involve a world of hurt for Snape and would undoubtedly bring Fudge into the situation. It was obvious that the Snape was retained by Dumbledore for some reason other than his less than sterling teaching record, and as such, Fudge would take a perverse delight in making certain that one of Dumbledore's men was ejected from the school, forcefully if possible. And while this would perhaps give Fudge another weapon to use against Dumbledore, the three companions all knew that Jean-Sebastian would consider the quality

of education and the protection of his daughter and her betrothed to be his first priority.

Strangely enough, Harry found her determination to be infectious, and though a part of him still nagged, telling him that he could handle the potions master himself, the new and growing sense of belonging to a family told him that he could be worrying about more important matters than a petty, greasy bat with a chip on his shoulder. Besides, the thought of Snape getting reprimanded, coupled with the even more delicious notion of Malfoy finally not getting away with whatever he wanted, was far too tempting to pass up. He could almost hear Malfoy's usual response. "When my father hears about this..."

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending upon whose opinion was canvassed, McGonagall indicated that she was powerless to do anything regarding Snape.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Potter, I believe you will need to speak with the Headmaster on this subject," she said with some regret. "I am glad you are receiving such good advice from Miss Delacour and not allowing Severus to get away with his behavior any longer."

Fleur's eyes narrowed in what Harry understood to be fury, having seen it several times in the past day. "Professor, are you telling us that you are aware of the abuse Harry has had to put up with from the potions professor?"

"Directly aware? No," was the response. "And I will thank you not to insinuate that I would have allowed it had I known. The fact of the matter is that I've always known how Professor Snape felt about Harry—even had I not been aware of his hatred for James, I could hardly have missed the comments he has made in my hearing over the years.

"But knowing of his feelings and suspecting him of improper behavior in his classroom are two completely different things. He's always been very circumspect in my presence, not surprising given he knows what my likely reaction would be."

"But what about his propensity to take away points or assign detentions?" Fleur persisted.

"He is very careful about the assignation of detentions, as he knows they are, to a certain extent, scrutinized. As for points, I will only say that not all is as it seems. I can assure you, however, that I would never allow him to influence the point system to the degree that it would adversely impact my, or any other, house."

With that, the three friends had to be content, as the deputy Headmistress would not be more explicit. She encouraged them to seek out the Headmaster immediately and discuss the matter with him. The three, correctly interpreting her words as a dismissal, took her advice.

A few moments late, the gargoyle outside the head's office announced them to Dumbledore, who immediately granted them access. They settled into the chairs across the desk from the Headmaster, and Harry could not help but notice Dumbledore regarding them curiously.

"Welcome, Harry, Miss Granger, Miss Delacour," the man said with aplomb. "I had not expected to see you in my office this early in the term. Nothing has happened with Madam Umbridge, has it?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Only if you consider the fact that she's incompetent, and does not know the material in the slightest."

"She tried to bait Harry into saying something she could use against him," Hermione chimed in. "But Harry kept calm and didn't give her anything."

"Very good," Dumbledore said with a nod. "Until we can come up a way to remove her, avoidance is the best policy."

"I must admit to being confused, Headmaster," said Fleur. "Since the woman is clearly not qualified to teach the subject, wouldn't it be easy to have her sacked?"

"I've tried," said Dumbledore with a sigh. "Unfortunately, the matter is out of my hands. In the past, this law was put into place to ensure the quality of instruction at Hogwarts was maintained in case a candidate could not be found by the Headmaster. Generally, however, the appointment would be made by the educational department. If the Headmaster did not agree with the appointment, he could bring it up with the Minister, and have him arbitrate the

situation. The law has never been changed, unfortunately, and it's being abused by Minister Fudge. As he is the one who appointed Madam Umbridge, there is nothing I can do at this point to remove her. We need some ammunition against her before we can make our move."

It was convoluted and much of it did not make a whole lot of common sense, but Harry, having known for quite some time that things in the magical world were often nonsensical, pushed the matter from his head. The Minister was a problem for another time.

"If you are not here about Madam Umbridge, what can I do for you this morning?"

"We're here about your other problem professor," Fleur said in an even, yet implacable voice.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at Fleur's tone. "Have you had an issue with a professor, Miss Delacour?"

"No, but Harry has. And apparently, it's been going on for some time."

The Headmaster's gaze shifted to Harry. "Mr. Potter?"

With as little emotion as possible, Harry related the events of the previous day's potions class, explaining the facts with little embellishment.

At the end of his account, Dumbledore sat back in his chair, and directed a stern gaze at Harry. "You say this is not the first time Professor Snape has behaved this way?"

"He's always seemed to have had it in for Harry, Sir," said Hermione. "He seems to have a knack for showing up at the wrong moment so that he can catch Harry doing something he shouldn't, while missing what Malfoy or someone else did to provoke it. In fact, I would suggest that it has happened a few too many times to be merely coincidence."

"To the best of your knowledge, has the professor ever given you unfair grades?"

Harry scratched his head—he had never even considered this aspect of the matter, though from Fleur's expression, she evidently had.

"I'm not sure I know, Sir," he finally responded slowly. "I've always known that the professor doesn't like me, but I never thought to question the grades he has given me. And how would I know that a potion he graded as an 'Acceptable' should actually have been 'Exceeds Expectations?'"

"How indeed?" was the Headmaster's rhetorical reply. He turned his attention to Hermione. "And you Miss Granger? By all accounts you have shown a certain amount of skill in potions class. Have you noticed anything with respect to Harry's grades?"

Hermione was clearly uncomfortable with the question, but she gamely tried to answer it all the same. "I'm not sure either, Headmaster. I think Harry's potions have been graded properly, though Professor Snape has not been as forthcoming with assistance in Harry's case as perhaps he should have been."

Dumbledore motioned for her to continue.

"Well," Hermione said slowly, "for example, sometimes when Harry has made a mistake, the professor will vanish his potion. He's not exactly kind about either, usually calling Harry stupid, or saying that he was watching Harry do the steps in the wrong order. Shouldn't he correct Harry if he notices he is doing something wrong, rather than simply giving him a failing grade?"

With a sigh, Dumbledore nodded his head. "Yes, indeed he should, Miss Granger. Have you ever seen Professor Snape behave this way with anyone else?"

"He seems to have a certain amount of dislike for Neville too, but to a certain extent he is hard on all Gryffindors, and favors his own house. I understand that there is a certain amount of bias for one's own house, Headmaster—that is unavoidable. But Snape goes entirely beyond what is acceptable. He has taken points from me for being an 'insufferable know-it-all,' and in Harry's first ever potions lesson, he asked questions which were definitely beyond what a first year should know, and when Harry could not answer, he deducted points."

"Is there an appeals process for unfair detentions and point losses Sir?" asked Fleur.

Dumbledore smiled and responded: "There certainly is—in fact, you are now invoking it."

"Then it should be published a little more clearly, Sir," said Hermione somewhat hesitantly. "I had no idea it existed."

"I believe you are correct, Miss Granger. I shall speak with Professor McGonagall on the matter."

"Regarding Professor Snape," Dumbledore continued, "I was certainly aware of his antipathy toward you, Mr. Potter. But while I am well aware of the cause of his disdain, it is not my place to explain the matter any further to you at this time. I assume Sirius has explained it at least in part?"

At Harry's nod he continued. "Very well then. As I was saying, I knew of his issues with you, but as you never approached me about his behavior, I assumed that it did not approach inappropriate levels."

"You did not know of his behavior towards Harry?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Contrary to popular opinion, Miss Delacour, I neither know everything that occurs in this school, nor do I attempt to know, though I do try to remain informed of the major issues at Hogwarts. There is far too much involved with the running of the school, not to mention my other positions, for me to attempt to become some all-knowing being at this school. At some point, I have to rely on information from others, and I trust in my professors to tell me if anything is amiss."

Sitting back in his chair, the Headmaster appeared to consider something and when he spoke, it appeared as though he was musing out loud and not truly talking to them. "Perhaps that is my greatest failing—the tendency to trust in others when they do not truly deserve it, or perhaps when they are adept at hiding their actions from casual scrutiny. Perhaps taking a more active role will help ameliorate the problem."

He was silent for several more moments before he turned his attention back to the students. "Thank you for bringing this to me, Harry. You may be assured that I will speak with Professor Snape about this."

"Thank you, Sir," said Harry in response.

"I beg your pardon, Headmaster," said Fleur, her countenance set in a stony cast, "but I'm concerned about the treatment I will receive from Professor Snape, just by my association with Harry. And furthermore, with all due respect, the professor is undermining the education at this school with his behavior, and affecting the futures of many students graduating from this school. I won't go into the mockery he is making of the points system.. I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but hasn't he proven unsuitable for his position?"

Dumbledore gazed placidly at Fleur, and while she was obviously a little uncomfortable with his scrutiny, she held her ground and met his eyes without flinching.

"You are to be commended for your concern, Miss Delacour. However, I do not believe that the situation is as bad as you seem to think."

Turning to Harry and Hermione, Dumbledore asked, "How would you rate Professor Snape's knowledge and teaching ability?"

A little uncomfortable, Harry nevertheless spoke up. "He's unpleasant, and sometimes even a foul git, but he's obviously a master potions brewer, Sir. And when he actually takes the trouble to explain something, he is able to do so effectively."

"Miss Granger?"

"I'd say the same as Harry, Sir."

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "I have observed the same—I've always known Professor Snape to be a brilliant brewer, and I am aware that his teaching method, though perhaps rough and blunt, and perhaps overly demanding and exacting, is acceptable. The exception to this, of course, is what we have already discussed in some detail—he needs to take a greater interest in correcting his students before they make a mistake if he is in a position to do so.



"However," he continued with a stern glance at them all, "I can assure you that the questions I asked you regarding Professor Snape's behavior were not mere idle conversation. The integrity of the educational process is a responsibility held by both parties—the professor and the student. The professor must teach the subject matter, help the students achieve what they are capable of achieving, and grade their work fairly and properly, while the student must listen to the teacher, give their best effort, and turn in work they have completed to the best of their ability. Clearly, in your case, Harry, Professor Snape has not upheld his end of the equation to the level I expect. However, his behavior in the classroom, while not proper, has not been egregiously so. However, I assure you that had there been any suspicion of unfair grading—beyond not offering advice before a student fails—I would have been much harsher with the professor than I will otherwise. As Headmaster of this school, I must consider the deliberate act of mis-grading assignments as a major violation of the educational process. I believe he needs to be taken to task and instructed in the proper manner to treat the students, but given what you have told me, I do not believe he has crossed that greater line. Am I correct?"

Harry, with support from Hermione, had to agree—rather reluctantly—that Dumbledore was correct. But Harry could not help but to add, "I'm not sure he'll ever be fair toward me."

"I understand that, Harry, but can you claim a complete lack of bias yourself? We are all colored by our perceptions, and yes, our experiences, and though I will not tell you more of Professor Snape's past, I can tell you that certain events in his past, have influenced him. However, it is not a requisite of the position to like all the students, merely to teach them properly and treat them fairly. Since I believe that for the most part he has been upholding the necessity of teaching the subject—though certainly more professionalism, not to mention personal care and attention, is desired—I believe I will focus on his fair treatment of you and demand he make changes."

"And if he won't?" Fleur asked, her tone and manner still somewhat confrontational.

"If that were to happen, Miss Delacour, then you can be certain that I will take the appropriate steps."

"With regard to your other points, though, I will tell you that Hogwarts has not experienced a dearth of potions graduates since Professor Snape began teaching here—on the contrary, though many will not scruple to say that they do not like him, very few have complained about his knowledge, or his ability to teach. And as for your concerns about the point system, I assure you I have that well in hand."

Harry looked curiously at his Headmaster, but no further explanation appeared to be forthcoming.

Dumbledore, however, adopted a stern visage when he spoke next, "I appreciate you approaching me with your concerns. However, in the future, I expect you to be a little more circumspect and a little less... confrontational in the way you make your case."

That last was clearly directed more at Fleur, but to Harry's eyes, Fleur appeared to be anything but repentant at the way she had addressed the Headmaster. Her next words made that fact abundantly clear.

"Thank you for listening to us, Headmaster," said Fleur. "I apologize for the way I spoke, but I do not apologize for the things I said. We truly do appreciate your assistance in this matter and hope that it can be resolved without involving my father who is, as you know, now Harry's Guardian. I'm sure you are aware that my father would be much less circumspect in making his sentiments known."

Dumbledore inclined his head in understanding of the meaning of Fleur's words. "I understand, and I thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will take it up with Professor Snape personally."

And with that, the discussion ended. And though Harry would perhaps have preferred to see Snape pitched out of Hogwarts on his ear, he could not fault Dumbledore for his words and opinions on the subject. As long as Snape was off his back, he would be content.

Leaving the office, the three friends made their way toward the Great Hall for breakfast, in silence for the most part. There was much to consider.

As it turned out, it was the next day after dinner before Albus called the potions master into his office to have the discussion he knew that Severus would not take well. In preparation for the confrontation, he had investigated the incident from the previous day's potions class, not because he doubted the young Gryffindors' claims, but because he wanted to confirm exactly what had occurred from various sources, should Severus ask. Unfortunately, he knew exactly how the conversation would progress—Severus would respond with a derogatory comment about Harry's arrogance, while instantly blowing off whatever he was accused of. It was the man's *modus operandi*, after all.

It was a simple matter, to be truthful. Though he was the Headmaster, he had always tried to make himself available to the student body—to be approachable, as it were. A few subtle comments to get the right students thinking about the subject about which he wished to learn more, and a little passive Legilimency later, he had all the facts he required. He had even managed to snare a couple of Slytherin fifth years in his net, a fact which he could hold in reserve should Severus prove obstinate, not that Albus expected him to be anything else. It was a good thing passive Legilimency was not illegal—frowned on, but not precisely illegal. It was not something Albus practiced much, though he was very skilled at it, but it was a good way to quickly get to the bottom of things when he either could not, or did not wish to draw the attention of a formal investigation. Luckily, it only revealed active and surface thoughts—to obtain memories, one would have to invoke active Legilimency with the incantation, and Albus was not certain he could withstand the things he would find in an adolescent's mind. Memories of his own adolescence were more than enough for him.

Investigation was not the only activity in which he had been engaged, however. Most of the previous evening he had spent soul-searching, asking himself over and over again if he had made the right choice—did the benefits of having Severus in the castle and close by outweigh the obvious drawbacks?

The man himself was more than a little unpleasant, and even Albus, who fancied he possessed an unusually large well of patience, found him to be difficult to tolerate. He was always in a foul mood, his personal hygiene was suspect, he could hold a grudge with an almost unparalleled ferocity for years at a time, and his world views were at odds with everything Albus cherished. And in particular, the

man was such a headache to regulate and control, that Albus had several times wondered whether having him here was truly worth the benefits, both real and potential. In fact, had Albus not had been absolutely certain that Severus was working for the light, his behavior alone would cause Albus to seriously suspect the man was still in fact a Death Eater, and still loyal to his erstwhile master.

He had decided long ago that when the Dark Lord returned—and Albus knew he would return—having Severus as a supposedly loyal Death Eater, yet positioned in Hogwarts, would be a valuable asset. The Dark Lord could then be convinced that Severus had remained faithful to the Pureblood cause, and used his position to spy on the light. Thus far, the events had proven that theory. Whatever else the man was, his powers of persuasion were not lacking, as he had immediately convinced the Dark Lord that his loyalty was unchanged, and had been admitted into the ranks of Voldemort's Death Eaters once again without question. And his worth as a spy had once again been proven invaluable, as several pieces of priceless information had been gained, not to mention tragedies prevented. The trick, of course, was in making use of the information, without alerting Voldemort to the fact that his circle had been compromised.

And yet, for all that benefit he brought to his position, one could not ignore the fact that Albus had unleashed the man on the student population knowingly and willingly. And contrary to what he had said earlier to Harry and his friends, Albus was well aware of the fact that though those who graduated with a potions NEWT were extremely well educated in the subject—for Severus truly was a gifted teacher when he took the trouble—there were many who could not stomach the thought of spending two additional NEWT years after the five they were already forced to put up with him. It had certainly impacted their society, as fewer potions NEWTs graduates meant that certain doors had been closed all to those students who may have pursued their NEWTs if Severus were not the Hogwarts potions professor. And those who did pursue their NEWT studies through self study, obviously did so at a slower pace, and likely gained their NEWTs with a less precise knowledge of the subject, than they would have, had they been taught in a classroom with a true master of the profession.

As for Severus's insistence that he would only accept students who scored an Outstanding on their potions OWL... Albus snorted at the thought. The man certainly had a certain arrogant conceit, to attempt

to thumb his nose at international standards, which declared that anyone with a passing grade in an OWL subject was eligible to continue to NEWT level studies. Though Severus blustered and snarled about it, the fact of the matter was that Albus had always made the true standards known, and saw to it that Severus accepted those who achieved those standards, whether he liked it or not.

Albus was well aware of the fact that he was taking much onto himself with the decision to keep Severus in his position. Some might say that the damage he was doing far outweighed the benefits to Severus's position as an inner circle member of Voldemort's retinue. In all fairness, Albus could not help but agree, especially when he had to deal with situations such as Harry's.

The thing which always stopped him from cutting all ties with Severus and sending him on his way, however, was the vital role Severus played. Voldemort was a very real threat, and in order to defeat him, Albus knew that every weapon in his arsenal must be employed to its greatest effect. Otherwise, if the unthinkable were to happen, and Voldemort should win, it could usher in a dark age the likes of which had never before existed, and which could last for centuries to come, possibly even spreading to all four corners of the world. In the light of such fears, concerns about the number of potions NEWTs graduates seemed an almost insignificant consideration.

When the time finally came and Severus sat across the desk from him, Albus considered the man before him. He was a petty, immature bully, but his greatest failing when it came to Harry Potter, was the inability to separate the boy, from the boy's father.

Severus likely knew why he was here already—there had been no other overt incidents in any of his classes to Albus's knowledge. His face was already set in his customary sneer, and Albus knew there would be a certain level of acrimony in the coming discussion. With Harry as the subject, it could not proceed in any other manner.

"I suspect you know why I have called you in my office today, Severus," Albus began without any preamble. With Severus, it was always best to be blunt and straightforward.

"The Potter brat has complained again, no doubt," drawled the potions master with a sniff of disdain.

This was exactly the kind of attitude which called Severus's usefulness into question, and Albus was determined to nip it in the bud.

"Again?" Albus queried gently. "Are you suggesting Mr. Potter has complained before?"

A roll of the eyes met Albus's question. "Incessantly I would imagine. The boy is as arrogant and spoiled as his father was."

Albus shook his head. "And that is where you are wrong, Severus. Mr. Potter has never before complained about your behavior, though I think that there are likely many instances in the past where he should have."

"Then I suppose you have taken the brat's side, and I am here to be reprimanded."

"Indeed you are, but I will remind you that I am not stupid, Severus. I am well aware of what occurred in your potions class two days ago, and his account has been corroborated by several students of both houses."

"Who did you speak to in Slytherin?" he demanded, instantly incensed that one of his own house member would betray him for a mere Gryffindor. It was Severus's second failing—an overwhelming loyalty to his own house, coupled with an almost pathological hatred for anything in red and gold.

"You know I have ways to find out the truth, Severus. I am well aware that Mr. Malfoy cast the first hex. Mr. Potter protected himself, and then responded in kind. I will also point out that Mr. Potter's object lesson was rather mild—a mere stinging hex."

Snape affected a nonchalant ignorance. "If that is so, Headmaster, then I was not aware of it. I saw Potter hex my house member, and I responded with the appropriate punishments."

"Do not insult my intelligence, Severus," Albus snapped, his anger building in the face of potions master's continuing belligerence. "I strongly suspect you were waiting outside the potions classroom for something to happen, as it usually seems to between those two—especially the way you let Mr. Malfoy get away with whatever he wishes. Regardless, a little investigation—which was no less than what I did, by the way—would have revealed the true events. You have once again let your arrogance and your hatred for that boy color your judgment."

Snape leaned back in his seat in an indolent and insolent manner. "I assure you, Headmaster, that Potter is well able to get himself into trouble without any manipulations on my part. He is exactly like his rule-breaking, arrogant father."

Albus sat back in his seat, removed his glasses and massaged his nose in frustration. Severus truly was blind if he could not see what everyone who met Harry—and had known his parents—could plainly see. It was frustrating, and though Albus knew he had to make the attempt, he knew that Severus would refuse to see reason.

"It truly makes me wonder, Severus," he said at length, "how such an intelligent man can be so blind about something which is plain to everyone else. You must get past this—you cannot continue to take out your festering resentment of James out on his son."

"Perhaps I simply see much more clearly than everyone else," Severus growled.

"Not when you insist on comparing Harry with James. The fact of the matter is that Harry is nothing like James was. He doesn't have the arrogance—which even you must admit James grew out of as he aged—nor does he have James's devil-may-care attitude.

"In fact, I believe if you examined the matter closely, you would see that Harry is much more like his mother, than his father, other than his rather striking physical resemblance to his father."

"Oh yes," drawled Snape with a roll of the eyes. "Potter is much like his mother. Lily excelled at every subject, and was the most intelligent witch I have ever met. Her son barely scrapes by with acceptable grades, and has none of the flair for potions which his mother had."

"I believe Mr. Potter has some extenuating circumstances which have affected his performance over the years. I believe you will be surprised to see his improvement across the board this year, Severus."

"I would not be merely surprised," said Snape rather flippantly. "Astonished does not even begin to cover what I would feel should the whelp actually develop some intelligence to go with his arrogance."

By now Albus's anger—always slow in developing—was beginning to build in the back of his mind. This was exactly why he wished he did not have to keep this man on staff and protect him against his own actions. He was so inflexible, so unwilling to learn or admit that he may have been wrong. Though holding his temper was beginning to be more difficult as the conversation went on, Albus bit back a caustic retort and forced himself to deal with the former Death Eater in a rational manner.

"That will be quite enough, Severus," he reprimanded. "I will not have you saying anything else about Harry, or any other student. In fact, if it were not Harry we were speaking of, you would have lost your position long ago."

Curiosity written on his face, Severus raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, Albus. Of what are you speaking?"

"Oh come now, Severus—you are not blind, nor are you stupid. Mr. Potter has had to learn to rely on himself—a consequence of his neglectful upbringing by his aunt and uncle. Any other student would have complained to his guardian or his parents the first time you behaved in the manner you behave toward Mr. Potter on a daily basis. The first time would have been a formal reprimand, placed permanently in your file. The second could very well have resulted in your dismissal.

"Furthermore," Albus continued, interrupting whatever Severus was about to say, "you should know that the free ride you have enjoyed with Mr. Potter has come to an end. Surely you know that Monsieur Delacour has taken over Mr. Potter's guardianship. Trust me when I tell you that Jean-Sebastian is not a man with whom you should trifle."



"So, you wish me to favor the little whelp like everyone else in this institution does?"

Albus glared at Severus, forcing him to look down after an intense staring match. This discussion—far more intense than any they had had before, regarding Harry—was long overdue. It was time for Severus to understand that this behavior and continual belittling of the young man would no longer be tolerated.

"I do not know how you think that Mr. Potter receives special treatment, but I assure you that he receives only his due as a student—I expect the same from you.

"As for his guardian, Mr. Potter and Miss Delacour have informed me that they have not informed Jean-Sebastian of what happened in your potions class, nor do they plan to do so. However, they have both made it clear that repeated incidents of unfair behavior would result in their bringing her father into the situation, and I would not blame them, nor would I stand in their way, if they felt such a step was necessary. I need not explain to you just how damaging that would be to your continued tenure here. Once I am not able to protect you, your only recourse would be to rejoin Voldemort. You know what would happen then."

A grimace was Snape's only response. Albus took it as a sign that he had finally managed to reach through to the man, if only to frighten him into behaving as he ought. He did not for a second believe that Severus truly believed anything Albus had just told him about Harry. If he acted properly, that was sufficient—there was nothing Albus could do to alter his beliefs. As he had told the children the day before, it was not necessary for a professor to like his students, only that he treat them properly. At this point, Albus would take any progress he could get.

"It appears I have no choice, Headmaster," the man finally said, his reply equal parts sulky and nonchalant.

"Indeed, you do not," Albus agreed. "I would hope that you would agree to behave with professionalism and decorum because it is the right thing to do, but at this point, I will take nothing more than your agreement due to your lack of other options."

A sneer was his response, but Severus also nodded his head.

"And let me be rightly understood, Severus," said Albus with more than a hint of steel in his voice, "that if I suspected you of intentionally grading Mr. Potter's work improperly, this would not be a reprimand—it would be an exit interview. But that is not something with which I need to concern myself, am I correct?"

Severus did not respond, he merely nodded tightly. He did not even allow his customary sneer to adorn his features.

"Good. I trust that your fair and unbiased judgment will continue, and that the educational process will be protected. The only thing I must insist upon in the matter of your teaching style, is that you be more proactive in assisting your charges—no more vanishing potions and berating students after they have made a mistake."

Again Severus agreed, though not without a certain level of anger.

"Now, as for the particulars of the altercation," Albus continued, noting the potions master's even darker expression at the mention of the incident, "as I have said, I have reviewed the incident with several of the students who were there. In particular, I found that not only did Mr. Malfoy and his friends incite the confrontation with their taunting, but that he also cast the first hex. As such, I am hereby reversing Mr. Potter's points deduction and detention, and reassigning them both to Mr. Malfoy. You may inform young Draco that he will serve his detention with Mr. Filch tomorrow evening."

Though Snape appeared like he wished to protest, he wisely kept his own council.

Albus shook his head slightly and focused a glare on the potions master. "Severus, I know you do not like this, but it is a reality. In particular, I would like to see you work with Mr. Malfoy—until now the boy has been allowed to get away with the worst behavior. He must be brought to see the fact that certain behaviors have consequences, or he will turn out exactly as his father has.

"In addition, I must see your own behavior improve, not only to Mr. Potter, but to all who are not members of your house. I do not wish to have to do it, but I will review every punishment and reward you give out if I have to."

The potions master appeared a little green, but Albus just inwardly smirked. Over the years, Severus had thought that his point changes were relatively easy to slip through the cracks, while detentions received a little more scrutiny. He thus removed points with impunity, though generally the detentions he assigned were more deserved.

What Severus did not realize, however, was that Albus already did review every point modification the man made, regardless of who was the recipient. A record was created of every punishment and reward handed out by every professor, head student and prefect, though only the Headmaster and deputy had access to those records. That was why a professor was required to state the point action—or detention—and the reason for the action. Albus spent some time every evening going through those records, and would then reverse those unnecessary or blatant deductions, leaving the man ignorant of the fact that his teeth had been pulled. It had proved necessary—otherwise, Severus would have single-handedly made the House Cup a mockery, ensuring his Slytherins won the house cup year after year, and by a handy margin. Not that Albus would ever let him know he had done this—it would no doubt incense Severus in the extreme. The man was already difficult enough to deal with, without adding that humiliation on top of everything else. Albus had not even told McGonagall that he was doing this, though he suspected that she already knew.

"I hope that this discussion has been clear, Severus," Albus continued after a moment of watching the man chew the issues over in his own mind. "I would hate to have it repeated, especially if Mr. Potter's guardian were to be brought into the fray."

Severus nodded curtly, and pulled himself to his feet. "I will attempt to modify my behavior, Headmaster. Now, if you will excuse me, I believe it is time to retire."

Without another word, Severus turned on his heel and stormed from the room, his cloak billowing in behind him. Sighing, Albus reached over to his candy dish and popped a lemon drop into his mouth, savoring the tart, yet sweet, candy. In truth, he had no faith whatsoever that Severus would change in any meaningful way. Oh, he would undoubtedly curb his natural unpleasantness for the time being, but Albus knew that he was simply incapable of modifying his

cherished beliefs. He would change his behavior for a short time, but eventually his hatreds and grudges would force their way back to the surface, and he would yet again be every bit as insufferable, his changes completely forgotten. Albus had seen it before. He was not certain just how many more times Snape could survive the cycle.

The rest of the week passed in an uneventful manner. Fleur's potions class with Professor Snape was spectacular in the complete lack of anything resembling the man's expected behavior. In fact, had Fleur not already known of the reasons for his changed attitude, she would have been surprised, and then suspicious that her friends had misled her with their stories of Snape's lessons. As it was, other than the one time when she had asked a question—not due to a lack of knowledge, but rather to her curiosity about his reaction—Snape had completely avoided her and all but ignored her very existence. The fact that the man absolutely exuded bad temper, regardless of his tight rein on his own emotions, left Fleur glad of the fact. She wanted to have no more personal contact with him than the lessons absolutely required.

Defense class was the next major event of the week, and though she had already heard stories from her friends about Umbridge's inability to understand the subject, let alone teach it, the woman's behavior was something she had not expected.

It appeared that number one on Umbridge's hit list was indeed none other than Harry Potter. Although she was unpleasant at times to certain members of the student body—as was expected, considering she was a well-known bigot—Harry had been the only one she had openly baited, as far as they were able to determine. Fleur had entered the classroom expecting to be the recipient of the woman's displeasure, by the simple fact of her Veela heritage.

However, other than a slight tightening of the eyes and a disdainful sniff when the woman had first seen her, she had acted much as Snape had, and completely ignored Fleur altogether. After a certain amount of thought, Fleur had determined that either Dumbledore had warned Umbridge against any kind of overtly improper behavior, or the woman had decided that Fleur was unnecessary to whatever plans she had up her sleeve. The chilling part of that thought was that Harry was undoubtedly a major part of her plans, and Fleur could not be in class with him.

What was entirely evident from almost the first moment Umbridge had had the students open their books, was the fact that Defense this year was a pointless exercise. As Harry and Hermione had already said, Umbridge taught them nothing, understood what actually was in the book imprecisely, and had no intention of allowing them to use their wands at any point during the year. It was a sticky situation, as Fleur, though she was certainly competent in defense, was no prodigy like Harry was, and she was certain she would have a difficult time passing her NEWT examination without first practicing the spells which would be on the examination. And it was obvious she would not obtain that in Umbridge's class.

Defense was an afternoon class, and once it let out, Fleur headed straight back to the common room in the company of the other seventh year Gryffindors. Since the fifth years were free that afternoon, Fleur found the group of them lounging in the common room. True to form, Hermione had her textbook and parchment spread out on the table, her face intense with concentration on her work. With her sat Harry and Neville on either side of her—both working gamely away on their own homework—while Ron looked bored on the opposite side of the table. Fleur shook her head—Ron was a good and staunch friend for the most part, but his aversion to homework was almost legendary. Fleur was surprised Hermione had been able to get him as far as she had on homework which was not due until the next week.

Once again feeling the frustration of the Defense class, Fleur flopped down on a nearby sofa and groaned.

Harry smirked. "Have fun in Defense?"

"Oh yes," Fleur said with a glare. "Umbridge is so intelligent and knowledgeable, and she has our interests at heart. I just know that I'll learn..." she paused dramatically, "...absolutely nothing that I'll need to know to pass my Defense NEWT!"

A smattering of laughter was heard, Fleur's voice having gone from innocent worship to frigid disdain as she completed her declaration.

Harry directed a look of wide-eyed astonishment at Fleur's declaration. "But Fleur, Professor Umbridge said that we'd get enough theoretical knowledge in her class that we'd have no problem with our tests."

Harry's breathy imitation of Umbridge's voice brought out an even louder burst of laughter from those close enough to hear the exchange.

"Ah, but not everyone can be Harry Potter."

"Alright, alright—enough of that already!" Harry groused, alternately glaring at Fleur and Ron. "I think I owe you for that comment, Ron."

Ron's responding grin was all insolence.

"But Fleur's right," Hermione interjected. "How are we supposed to pass our OWL with Umbridge teaching us nothing, and not even allowing us to use our wands? Even Harry I think would admit to needing at least a time or two to practice the spells we will be quizzed on."

"We'll do the same as we do every year," said Harry with a shrug. "The same we did in first year with the stuttering idiot, or the second year with the fraud... Need I go on?"

"But this is different, Harry," Hermione complained, her voice taking on an almost whining quality. "We have OWLs this year and those test scores will affect our future schooling."

"Is this how it always is?" Fleur asked teasingly.

Smattered chuckles were heard throughout the rest of the room, and several of the students shared an amused glance.

"Well, for starters there was Professor Quirrel in first year," Harry began. "He not only stuttered so badly that you could not understand him, but also had Voldemort hitching a ride on the back of his head."

"Yeah, then there was the fraud, Gilderoy The-Only-Spell-I-Can-Cast-Is-An-Obliviate Lockhart," chimed in Ron. "The moron couldn't cast anything properly, and then to cap the year, he tried to off us and take credit for killing the basilisk for his latest work of fiction."

"And how about the disguised Death Eater from last year?" added Neville. "Although I will admit that Crouch was actually a decent teacher—at least he knew his stuff."

"That's nothing," one of the twins spoke up.

"Yeah, in our first year, our Defense professor didn't even last until Halloween," said the other.

Angelina rolled her eyes. "And her replacement didn't make it past the end of the year himself."

"There you have it, Fleur," said Harry. "Defense has always been a problem like the Headmaster said. Only once in my time at Hogwarts has the professor been competent and on our side!"

"Then how have you managed up until now?" Fleur demanded.

"We've had to fend for ourselves," was Harry's simple reply. "We used the textbooks—when they weren't Lockhart's fiction, anyway—and practiced on our own."

"But that's not going to happen this year," contradicted Hermione. "Not with Umbridge watching us like a hawk."

"Perhaps there is a way around it?" Fleur suggested. "We learned some things from Auror Moody this summer. Is there a way for us to get some more books and practice on our own?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip, deep in thought. "We'd have to make sure it doesn't get back to Umbridge."

"Would Dumbledore support us?" asked Ron.

Hermione shook her head. "It would be best if we didn't involve the Headmaster. If it got back to Umbridge that he had helped us, it may give her a reason to see him removed from the school."

It was a quandary, but there had to be some solution which they had not come up with yet. If they needed to fend for themselves, then that was what they would have to do. Still, without a teacher, it would be very difficult. Surely something would come up to improve

the situation. At least, Fleur hoped something would present itself. It would be a long year with Umbridge at the helm otherwise.



## Chapter 14 – Avoiding Detention

The rest of the week passed in relative quiet for the circle of friends. Harry went to the second potions class of the week, wondering if the treatment Fleur had received from Snape was due to the Headmaster coming down on him, or if she had merely been granted a reprieve. Happily, it appeared to be the former as, other than a few glares, Snape largely left Harry alone—in fact, he said very little to any of the Gryffindors outside of his normal instruction. This, of course, pleased the entire Gryffindor contingent, though perhaps Neville and Harry wore the largest grins.

Fleur and Harry received a letter from her father on Friday, asking how their first week of schooling went, though when they read between the lines, they could both see he was asking about a certain professor in particular. Fleur responded positively for the most part, in that, though the woman had tried to bait Harry into a detention, nothing of note had happened, as he had kept his temper in check.

In Jean-Sebastian's letter, however, his frustration with the fact that Fudge was doing nothing about Voldemort's return was readily apparent. The group had been watching the Prophet closely enough to know that the Minister persisted in denying the Dark Lord's return, flatly refusing to hear anyone who tried to tell him otherwise. As a result, Auror recruitment and training continued to proceed at the same inadequate levels, and the Ministry forces were significantly lagging behind the Death Eaters, who were, without a doubt, not neglecting their own training and recruiting efforts. Though he was not explicit, Fleur was led to suspect that her father had been in more or less continual contact with Dumbledore about the situation, but that his own position as ambassador did not leave him any room to pressure Fudge, much though he would have wished he could.

Of note in the school, Umbridge had been seen speaking with to some of the more rabid extremist Slytherins—of whom it was not surprising that Malfoy took center stage. After discussing it at some length, the group could only assume she was intent upon ingratiating herself to them, and promising rewards for information and their cooperation. Thus far nothing had come of this cozying up, but Harry in particular was worried that whatever reason the toad had to curry favor with the Slytherins, it appeared to be preparatory for whatever she had planned for the future. An interesting side note,

however, was the fact that though many would have expected Snape to agree with Umbridge in principle, the reality appeared to be the complete opposite—he in fact appeared to avoid her as though she carried a rather virulent disease, conversing with her in short, clipped language when discourse was unavoidable.

Harry, Fleur and Ron had their first official practice with the Quidditch team that weekend, and though Fleur was not actually a starter, she found that she enjoyed the practice, and more importantly, the camaraderie of the team. Though she certainly did not possess the skills or the familiarity with her teammates that Katie, Angelina, and Alicia had with each other, Angelina was still able to comment that either she or Ginny would make admirable substitutions, should they be necessary. The Quidditch team was supremely confident for the upcoming Quidditch cup—on parchment, none of the other teams appeared to stack up.

And of course, Ron continued in his attempts to get closer to Hermione, oblivious to the fact that she was not responding the way a young woman who was willing to be courted would be expected to respond. Or perhaps it was more likely that he was so set upon winning her that he was almost willingly obtuse to the fact that she simply was not interested. Hermione did not want to make a scene, nor did she wish to hurt him, but she felt he was ultimately going to force her to do so. It was a sticky business, and she was not certain how Ron would respond—not well, if she knew him at all.

At potions class the next Monday, Harry made certain to continue to keep his head down, do his potions work, and avoid drawing the professor's ire. And though he was feeling a little more confident in his brewing abilities—partially from his generally greater confidence those days, and partially from the better atmosphere in the class—he was not so confident that the professor would let up on him. Besides, he knew that Snape was so set against him that regardless of whatever had passed between professor and Headmaster, avoidance was still the best policy.

On that day, however, though Snape generally stayed away from him, Harry would often look up and find the potions professor's baleful glare fixated on him, accompanied by the man's customary sneer. It was truly annoying to the young man, but though he would have preferred to have called the greasy bat out for it, the warnings

about not giving his enemies anything to hold over him still filled his mind, and he declined to incite a confrontation.

Unfortunately Snape was not of the same mind. The class was ending and the students were packing their things and beginning to file out when the hated man's voice rang out.

"Potter! Stay after class. I have something to discuss with you."

Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione, who whispered that she, Neville, and Ron would wait outside for him, before indicating his assent to the professor. He sat down at his desk, watching the other students leave, ignoring the almost gleeful derision on Malfoy's face. Once they were gone, he sat at his desk, waiting for Snape to begin. The man seemed disinclined to begin—he simply stared at Harry, showing his dislike and contempt. Harry said nothing. Harry was not uncomfortable—he refused to be uncomfortable!—but he would not start anything with the professor and give him the excuse to hand out the punishments he so relished.

At length Snape stood and approached Harry's desk. "So, you found it necessary to complain to the Headmaster about me."

"I did."

"And now I suppose you wish special treatment in my class, the same as you receive in any other class?"

Harry only refrained from rolling his eyes by the slimmest of margins. "I do not, Sir. I expect to be treated the same as any other student."

"Your arrogance knows no bounds, Potter."

"How can it be arrogance to expect to be treated the same as anyone else?"

Snape said nothing. He merely continued to glare at Harry, his hatred and contempt still plain for all to see. The two emotions were ones which Harry felt he could return quite cheerfully, and in equal measure.

"I have done nothing to earn your hatred, Professor," Harry continued, still careful to refrain from giving this man any

ammunition to use against him. "All I ever did was to show up on my first day of classes. You appeared then to already dislike me before you even knew me. Why?"

"You are too much like your father," Snape spat. "He was a blight upon this school, always running wild with those friends of his, always strutting around the school like he owned it."

"Sounds like a certain blond ponce I know," was Harry's sarcastic reply.

"Do not interrupt me! We were speaking of your father and no one else."

"Oh really?" This time Harry was not able to keep the scorn out of his voice. "I thought we were talking about me? I asked you why you hated me from the beginning, and you talk about my father's arrogance and how I mirrored him, but you did not even take the time to get to know me before you made that judgment."

Snape's eyes narrowed, and though Harry knew he had scored a significant point, he knew there was no way the professor would acknowledge it. He said nothing, however, which allowed Harry to continue.

"I'm afraid I cannot know how much like my father I am. You see, he's dead!" Harry barked. Though the admission that his parents were not with him had always been painful, Harry forced himself to be blunt with his recalcitrant professor. "I was too young to know my father when he died. So you see, Professor, any resemblance between my father and me is a result of genetics and chance—nothing more."

"Believe me, Potter, you are just like your arrogant father."

Rising to his feet, Harry fixed a glare on the man. "Professor, may I speak bluntly?"

A raised eyebrow met his question. "Are you not doing so now?"

"After a fashion. However, I'd like to be able to speak my mind as you are so obviously doing. No detentions, no point deductions—just you and me clearing the air."

Seeming to be intrigued, Snape peered at him contemplatively. "Very well then. Everything said in this room is completely off the record until further notice, or until you leave the room. Now, I believe you have something to say?"

"Yes, Sir," Harry said with a tight nod. "It may come as no surprise to you, but my feelings for you match your obvious hatred for me. But where I am forced to show you respect as a professor—which you have in no way earned, I might add—you feel free to belittle me, and behave as though I am something disgusting you wiped from your shoes. You are a vile, bitter, and contemptuous man, with very few redeeming qualities, and your abilities as a potions master in no way compensate for your utter failure as a professor. Your behavior is atrocious, and in the Muggle world you would have lost your position years ago. You have taken a dislike to me because of something which happened between you and my father before I was even born, and you have never once attempted to look past my resemblance to my father and to see the person I am, rather than what your preconceptions suggested I would be.

"What you continue to fail to understand is that I don't know who my father was as a person, and as such, I can hardly emulate him, whether I want to or not. He may have been an arrogant git like you say. He may have acted like he owned the school and everything in it. In fact, he may have acted like the very world owed him everything on a silver platter. I wouldn't know. I can tell you that he could hardly be worse than that little Pureblood idiot you are so intent upon protecting, so it seems to me that on top of everything else, you are a hypocrite as well as a bully.

"The point of this discussion is that I've had to put up with every bit of abuse that you thought you could get away with, ever since I came to this school. I will not continue to do so. One way or another, your treatment of me will cease, or I will do everything in my power to see you lose your precious position, and I expect that an entire generation of Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw students will laud my name after you are booted from this school in disgrace!"

Silence reigned in the room after Harry's rant, and though he would have liked to break it, Harry had had his say, and he would wait to see what Snape said in response. It appeared that his outburst had done no overt damage—it was not like it was possible to further

damage their relationship. In fact, the Professor's demeanor had softened slightly, and he now looked at Harry with a speculative eye.

"I suppose there is no disputing your courage," Snape finally said.

"I would imagine that is why the hat placed me in Gryffindor," was Harry's dry reply.

He was not going to touch on the fact that he had specifically requested that the hat not place him in Slytherin. He had no idea how Snape would respond to that piece of information. Perhaps dancing with joy that the hat had not placed him in Slytherin was just as likely a reaction as anything else.

"Quite," Snape responded.

After peering at Harry for a few more moments, Snape appeared to come to a resolution. "Very well then, Potter. As long as you keep your nose clean in class and do your work with a certain level of competence, I shall leave you alone. Will that do?"

"What about Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"What about him?" was the dark reply.

"Come on, Professor, you are not blind. Malfoy is a thorn in my side whenever he gets the chance. He taunts me and my friends, tries to get us in detention, and attempts to sabotage our potions whenever he thinks he can get away with it. Considering the fact that you are teaching this class, he thinks he can get away with it with whenever he likes. I can keep my head down and do my best in class, but I guarantee that if Malfoy tries something, my response will not be to his liking. I will not allow that little prick to attack any of my friends any longer."

"You are lucky that this all off the record, or you would have lost some of Miss Granger's hard-earned points."

"Which is why I asked," was Harry's response. "You don't think I'd be so blunt unless I was certain it was off the record, do you? I'm not that stupid."

Snape snorted. "Though I hate to say it, it's very Slytherin of you, Potter. I will deal with Mr. Malfoy."

"Very well, Professor."

Nodding his head, Harry picked up his backpack and sauntered from the room. The fact that Snape's eyes continued to bore into his back as he left did not escape him.

"What was that all about?" Hermione asked when he joined his friends.

"Nothing much," Harry said with a wink. "Just clearing the air a little with the Professor."

"Did you punch his lights out?" asked Ron with a grin.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Perhaps you should do that, Ronald, if you want to have detention for the rest of your time at Hogwarts."

"It might actually be worth it," said Neville. "At least it would be satisfying."

The group laughed as they started down the hall.

"I agree with Neville," said Harry. "But no, I didn't punch him. Like I said, we cleared the air a little. Hopefully, we'll have less trouble with Snape from now on."

By the time the fifth years had reached the Defense classroom later that afternoon, Harry had related the story of his discussion with Snape to all of his friends. Fleur in particular seemed to be extremely pleased by the turn of events. But though word that something had occurred between Harry and the potions professor had spread through the school very quickly, Harry asked those who were aware of the exact nature of the confrontation to keep it quiet. He did not want Snape to get the idea that he was spreading their private dealings to all and sundry—his new truce with the potions professor was too new and fragile, he sensed, take it lightly.

Malfoy, however, appeared perplexed. He had obviously suspected that something was up when Harry had been told to stay behind, but seeing Harry laughing with his friends rather than seething at his

treatment was clearly not what he had expected. As they were leaving the hall, Harry caught a look of discontent upon the face of his nemesis, which darkened even further when Harry flipped him a jaunty salute. At that moment, it occurred to Harry that he had still not heard what Malfoy's reaction had been to learning he had been assigned Harry's detention—that outcome could not be fueling any good temper for the Malfoy scion. Harry supposed that Snape had told the blond ponce to accept the detention and keep his mouth closed, though Harry was surprised that Malfoy had listened, if such had been the case.

Though one of his Monday classes appeared to have changed for the better, the other dreaded class—which ironically would have been his favorite in previous years, regardless of the Headmaster's inability to provide a proper professor—would prove that it still had the capacity to infuriate him.

Defense that day was much the same as it had been the previous week. Umbridge still demanded they put their wands away as soon as the students entered the class, and she once again lectured directly from the text. In truth, had the subject matter still not held some interest for Harry, regardless of the less than stellar textbook, he would have been in danger of considering Defense to be almost the equal of History for its ability to numb his mind into sheer insensibility.

What changed, however, was the fact that for the most part, Umbridge completely ignored him, even when he wanted to say something, which was very infrequent. It was nearing the end of class when Harry raised his hand to speak—and was ignored—for the third time, as Umbridge called on Hannah Abbot to answer a question she had posed. Harry raised an eyebrow at Hermione, who returned his gesture with a smirk of her own.

"Looks like someone has a new tactic," Harry whispered.

"It would seem to be so," Hermione responded.

Their short tete-a-tete, however, served to draw the professor's attention. She peered at him with her patently false and irritating silly smile, and asked him in her high voice, "Did you have something to say, Mr. Potter? Did I not instruct the class to raise your hands when



you have something to say? Perhaps you would like to share with the class what you and Miss Granger were speaking of?"

Grimacing, Harry responded, "I was merely pointing out that I haven't been able to answer a question yet this class, Professor."

"Well, Mr. Potter, if I had known you were so eager to participate in class, I would have called upon you sooner."

"Thank you, Professor. It is good to know that I am a valued member."

Umbridge peered at him suspiciously, before she broke out into her sickly sweet smile once again. "Indeed, Mr. Potter. However, there is still the matter of your speaking out of turn, and I'm afraid that you and Miss Granger will have to serve a detention. It seems I must prove my point that I wish to have discipline in this class."

Very much wishing he could respond to the woman, Harry nevertheless calmed himself and kept quiet. It was no doubt part of the woman's plan to attack him, and though he was not certain if this was a detention which the Headmaster would overturn, he thought that at the very least it would be a good idea to inform him of what had happened.

"Very good, Mr. Potter—it appears you can control your trouble-making nature if you so choose. Perhaps we shall be able to make a proper wizard out of you yet."

Even that failed to raise a response from Harry—the woman's opinion meant less than that of a flobberworm to him, after all. Umbridge appeared to have a slight air of disappointment to her manner at being unable to obtain a rise out of him. However, her sudden change thereafter to studied nonchalance made him instantly suspicious.

"You shall serve detention..." she trailed off while tapping her wand on her chin in what Harry was convinced was a false show of considering the situation.

Her face suddenly lit up with glee. "Yes, your detention shall be served on Thursday, immediately before dinner." She all but sneered at Harry. "As I will be away from Hogwarts that day on

Wizengamot business, you shall serve your detention with Professor Snape, and I will be certain to ensure he has something... suitable for you both to do."

"But that's the day of Sirius's trial!" Harry blurted out, immediately guessing the thrust of the woman's actions. "I've received permission to attend with Professor Dumbledore."

"Now, now, Mr. Potter," soothed Umbridge. "We can't have students who are scheduled for detention leave the school on an obviously unnecessary field trip—it's not fair to the other students."

"It's not fair for you to assign a detention on a day which means so much to me," Harry snapped in response.

"Perhaps one day is not enough for you," cooed Umbridge. "You and Miss Granger will serve your Thursday detention with Professor Snape, and then you will serve Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with me."

Harry saw red, and was almost ready to tear into the woman, but Hermione's presence by his side, coupled with the hand she laid on his shoulder, reminded him of the need to keep his cool. He looked away from Umbridge, while allowing an emotionless mask to descend over his face, and he ignored the woman for the rest of the class—she did not call on him either, though she did glance smugly in his direction several times before the bell rang.

At the end of the class, Harry slammed his textbook in his bag, and stalked from the room, barely aware of his friends attempting to catch him as he strode through the halls of Hogwarts.

"Harry, will you hold up a moment?" Hermione shouted.

He almost caused Hermione to run into him, he pulled up so abruptly.

"Where are you going?" she demanded once she had regained her balance.

"Dumbledore," was Harry's short reply. "What she did was not fair—I'm not going to let her get away with it."

Turning to look at Neville and Ron, who had hurried to catch up, Harry motioned them away. "Go ahead with Hermione to the Great Hall—I'll be there when I finish speaking with the Headmaster."

Ron and Neville nodded, but Hermione dug in her heels. "No way, Harry. You'll need someone to back you up—I'm coming too."

The fact that Harry felt he did not exactly require help with the Headmaster gave way to the idea of the comfort he knew Hermione's presence would bring. He nodded briefly to her before turning and marching off down the hallway which led toward the Headmaster's office.

Once they had gained admission to the office, they entered, earning a raised eyebrow from the elderly Headmaster.

"I take it something else has happened?" he inquired mildly. "Is this to be a regular occurrence, Harry?"

"I hope not, Sir," Harry responded with a tight grin.

Dumbledore peered at Harry for several moments. "I did some checking earlier, and other than your rumored discussion with Professor Snape, nothing of significance happened in your potions class. Can I therefore assume that your current problem has nothing to do with potions?"

"Yes, Sir," said Harry. "There was a bit of an incident in Defense, and Umbridge assigned me an unfair detention that I'd like you to review."

Nodding, Dumbledore said, "Very well, please proceed."

Being careful not to omit anything, yet give the Headmaster a detailed explanation of what exactly happened, Harry related the story of the confrontation with the Defense Professor. It took only a few moments, for the entire tale to be related, after which Dumbledore sat back in his chair and regarded the teens thoughtfully.

"Unfortunately, Harry, there is nothing I can do about the original detention—it is the professor's prerogative as to how they run their class, and how they enforce discipline."

"But, Sir," Hermione exclaimed, "that's completely unfair and beyond the type of punishment which should be assessed for whispering in class."

"I don't disagree with you, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore. "However, technically, she has the right to assess a detention. But that doesn't mean we can't modify the terms of that detention."

Feeling some relief that by Dumbledore's implication, he would not have to miss Sirius's trial, Harry asked, "You said the first detention. Can you do something about the other one?"

"That is a different matter," said Dumbledore firmly. "Though perhaps your protests could be construed as backtalk if one were to so choose, I believe the stress of the situation led to your responding as you did. As such, we shall call Professor Umbridge in to hear her explanation, after which I will make my final decision. After all, I am certain it is in our best interests that you not serve a detention with the professor for now. Wouldn't you agree?"

Agreeing with a grin, Harry watched as the Headmaster approached his Floo connection, and threw a handful of Floo powder into it, calling for the Defense Professor's office. After a moment, the fiery visage of Professor Umbridge, looking even more ridiculous than usual, appeared in the flames.

"Ah, Professor Umbridge," said Dumbledore in greeting. "Will you please step into my office for a moment?"

A moment later, the Headmaster had retreated from the fireplace to allow the Defense professor to step through. She immediately noticed the students sitting facing the desk and donned her simpering mask, though Harry would clearly see that she was not happy at all to see them.

"Yes, Headmaster? Is there a problem?" she simpered.

"I'm afraid there is, Professor," replied Dumbledore while returning to his chair. "Mr. Potter here has come to me to appeal a detention which you assigned to him in Defense class, and in the course of my investigation, I have called you here to hear your reasons for assigning this detention."

Umbridge's eyes narrowed. "I was not aware that I had to justify my decisions to fifth year students."

"You do not to the students, of course," responded the Headmaster. "However, in the case where a student invokes the appeals process, you must account for your actions to me. Mr. Potter has given me his account of what occurred in your Defense class, and now I must hear your reasons before I render a judgment."

The familiar sweet smile once again appeared on her face. "Of course, Headmaster. Very well—I assigned a detention for speaking out in class. I have been trying to instill discipline in my class and these two students were speaking out of turn."

"Yes. Mr. Potter has admitted to whispering in class."

"Then why are we having this discussion?"

"Because you subsequently assigned another three days when Mr. Potter protested, not to mention you specifically assigned the original detention on the day you knew Harry would be absent from the school to attend his godfather's trial."

"I assure you I did no such thing, Headmaster, and I resent these two students," the word was almost sneered, "implicating otherwise."

"I assure you, Professor, that I am well able to make the connection myself without Mr. Potter or Miss Granger's assistance," rejoined the Headmaster. "Have you anything further to add?"

"Not at all, Headmaster. I saw a violation of my classroom rules and I reacted accordingly. As for Mr. Potter's subsequent detentions, I will not tolerate any cheek in my class."

"Very well then," replied Dumbledore. "Obviously, though I believe your punishment for whispering in class is excessive, I will agree that it is your right to assign the level of punishment you deem fit. However, demanding Mr. Potter attend a detention on the day his Godfather is to be tried and thereby preventing his attendance is unreasonably cruel. Therefore, Mr. Potter and Miss Granger will instead serve their detentions this evening with their head of house and not Professor Snape."

It was easy to tell Umbridge was not happy with the Headmaster's decision, but she merely smiled before saying, "Very well, Headmaster. However, as I am available tonight, Mr. Potter and Miss Granger may serve their detentions with me."

"I have already made my decision, Professor Umbridge," Dumbledore snapped in response. "You will abide by it."

"As for the matter of Mr. Potter's subsequent detentions," he stated when the Defense Professor would have interjected, "there is no basis in fact for those detentions to be assigned, particularly in light of the fact that the subject being discussed was one which is highly emotional to Mr. Potter. Those detentions are hereby reversed."

"This is one of the reasons I was sent here," Umbridge hissed. "Your continual and blatant favoritism toward Mr. Potter and his friends must cease immediately, Headmaster!"

"Or perhaps I should speak with the Minister about your blatant bias," she continued with an attempt at nonchalance.

Dumbledore's eyes appeared to flare briefly, but he made no response to Umbridge. He, instead, turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, I think we have dealt with the matter about which you inquired. Is there anything else you would like to say at this time?"

"No Sir," Harry replied after glancing at Hermione. It appeared that whatever was to be said in the subsequent conversation between the Headmaster and Defense Professor was not meant for their ears to hear.

"Very well then—you may leave. Please report to Professor McGonagall at seven this evening for your detention. I will ensure she knows you are coming."

Agreeing to this, the two teens stood and retreated from the room. When they had made their way down to the hallway beyond the gargoyle guardian, Harry turned to Hermione with a grin.

"Looks like someone's in trouble," he said in a singsong voice.

"Harry!" Hermione scolded, though a matching grin was etched upon her face. "That's the kind of attitude that saw us in the office in the first place."

Harry shook his head. "It looks like she really wants me in detention. We'll have to be very careful."

Hermione agreed and together they headed in the direction of the Great Hall.

As soon as the door closed behind the two students, Albus allowed the mask of congeniality slip from his face. He fixed a stern glare at the Defense Professor, allowing every bit of his distaste for the woman to show in his expression.

"Madam Umbridge, must I remind you that I am the Headmaster of this institution?"

"A Headmaster who has perhaps passed his prime," said Umbridge in response. Her accompanying sneer would have made Snape himself proud. "And you will refer to me as 'Professor Umbridge,' Headmaster,"

Albus snorted with some disdain. "In public, perhaps, when I have no other choice. In private, however, I will not refer to you with an honorific which you have not earned."

Though her nostrils flared in anger, Albus watched her as she struggled to come up with a response. His rejoinder was the truth, after all, and there was little she could do to refute the fact.

"Let us not obfuscate, Madam," Albus continued after allowing her to stew for a moment. "You are not in this school to improve the quality of education or the atmosphere, or whatever other platitudes you are attempting to push on the student body or the public at large. You are here precisely to attempt to marginalize Harry and discredit me, all because of your narrow views of the world, and the Minister's short-sighted fear that I will attempt to replace him. You should remind Minister Fudge that I could have had the Minister's post had I wanted it when Minister Bagnold retired. I did not want it then, and do not want it now, as I already have more than enough on my plate."

"However, I am and will remain the Headmaster of this school, and as such, I am responsible not only for its running, but also for matters such as the adjudicating of appeals. My judgment stands as I have already said. In the future, if you feel you must make an object lesson due to such a minor breach of your classroom rules, I suggest that you deduct points from the offenders. For an infraction such as Mr. Potter and Miss Granger brought before me today, a detention is much too severe."

Though it was obvious Umbridge was furious, she merely nodded tightly. "Very well, Headmaster, but I shall warn you that if you continue to blatantly protect troublemakers such as Mr. Potter, you may very well find yourself removed from your position."

"And I will warn you, that continued attempts to attack Mr. Potter—or any other student at this institution—will result in your removal, Madam Umbridge. Given the fact that your very competence in the subject you teach is suspect—you do not even hold a NEWT in Defense!—I doubt anyone other than your precious Minister would protest such a move. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite," snapped Umbridge.

Without any further words or even a glance, she returned to her own office via the Floo, leaving Albus to his thoughts. The necessity of having the woman at Hogwarts was galling, but at that moment, he knew he had no choice but to accept her presence. Regardless of his words to her, he knew he needed an airtight reason to remove her from the school, allowing him to replace her with a professor of his own choice. He had someone in mind, but the timing was not correct at the moment, not that he would have hesitated had he possessed a valid reason for her removal at present.

Thinking about the matter for several moments, Albus worried about the situation. He certainly did not need Jean-Sebastian's intervention in the matter, which would certainly come about if Umbridge could not be reined in. Perhaps at some point it would be prudent to allow Harry to have a detention with the woman—carefully controlled of course—to discover exactly what she wanted with him. He was not certain at present what the woman intended, but he would not put it past her to go too far—then maybe he would have his ammunition to have her removed.



After a few more moments of thought, Albus let out a weary sigh and rose from his chair. Popping a lemon drop in his mouth, he exited his office and made his way toward the Great Hall, his mind working the problem over and over as he walked.

Having made their way to dinner, Hermione sat down across the table from Harry, her mind chewing over the problem which Defense had presented that year. This year's class was turning out to be far worse than it had been in any previous year, which was saying a lot, considering the comedy of errors Defense had been for almost the entirety of her schooling career. How would they possibly pass their OWLs this year with Umbridge at the helm? Unfortunately, no answers came, regardless of her will to discover some sort of way to alleviate the problem. A part of her wanted to suggest anew that they try to have some competent adult join them on weekends to give them some tutoring, but having witnessed Umbridge's "teaching" thus far, and her Ministry-driven insistence that the students not be allowed to practice 'dangerous and unnecessary spellcasting,' she knew that the idea of tutoring would not go over well. And Dumbledore appeared to believe that directly opposing the woman at the moment time was not prudent, so unfortunately, whatever they attempted would have to be done in secret.

Pushing the thoughts away for contemplation at some other time, Hermione focused on what her friends were saying, only to find out that her thoughts were similar to the topic of conversation. Evidently Harry had told Fleur of the confrontation in Defense, and the subsequent meeting in the Headmaster's office, for she appeared quite distressed.

"What are we going to do about Umbridge?" Hermione heard Fleur ask. "I've got NEWTs this year, and it's going to be difficult to pass the practical if we aren't able to practice the spells in advance."

"And we have OWLs," said Hermione, chewing her lip in agitation.

"That doesn't even account for Voldemort's return," added Ron. "At this rate, we won't even know enough to defend ourselves."

"We did learn some things from Moody this summer," Neville disagreed.

"Yeah, but we haven't been able to practice much of it," retorted Ron.

Neville held out his hands in supplication before returning his attention to his meal.

"We all know the problem, Ron," said Hermione. "We just need to find a solution."

"Hello everyone," a dreamy voice interrupted.

Hermione looked up and saw Luna standing behind Harry, smiling absentmindedly. Harry turned and, smiling at Luna, he scooted a little closer to Fleur. "Would you like to join us, Luna?" he asked.

Smiling, Luna sat down beside him, and greeted the entire group. "Thanks, Harry. It's a little disconcerting being the only non-Gryffindor in our group. But the Ravenclaws don't really like me very much—I'd much prefer to eat with you."

"Then the Ravenclaws are stupid, Luna," Neville replied seriously from her other side. "You're welcome to join us at any time."

A general murmur of agreement made its way through the group. Though perhaps a student sitting at any table other than their own was not something which happened often, it was not disallowed. They all truly liked Luna and considered her a friend, so everyone was glad to have her join them.

"Besides, the nargles told me you were speaking of a particular problem."

It was difficult, but Hermione just managed to avoid rolling her eyes. She liked Luna—she truly did—but sometimes the girl's whimsical nature and preoccupation with her creatures was enough to drive Hermione nutty. This was a serious issue they were discussing, after all.

"We're just trying to figure out what to do about Defense," said Harry. "We've got important tests at the end of the year that we won't pass if we can't practice."

"That and we need to practice more fighting like Professor Moody said," Neville chimed in.

"Why don't you start a defense club?" asked Luna, while filling her plate with food.

Hermione looked at Luna blankly. "A defense club?"

"Yes," replied Luna. "Anyone can start up a club with permission. In this case, I think you'd probably prefer to keep the club secret from all the staff, and I wouldn't blame you for that. It would provide us with the opportunity to the spells we need to know and learn how to better protect ourselves at the same time."

"Umbridge wouldn't like it," said Harry, voicing the obvious problem.

"Who says she has to know?" asked Fleur. "If we only invite certain people, she would never even have to know that it exists."

"That's got possibilities," said Hermione, beginning to become excited about the idea. "We could get Harry to lead it."

The general agreement at Hermione's statement did not, unfortunately, include the beneficiary of her largesse. Harry blinked in surprise, and then regarded Hermione with some befuddlement.

"Why me?"

"You're the best at defense, Harry," Hermione said, deciding that a simple reply was likely to go much farther with her friend. "You always get a spell after the first few tries, and you always help others get it after, which shows a certain flair for teaching."

Harry still looked skeptical. "I'm not so sure about that, Hermione. Besides, if we could form a club, I think it would be best to get someone in a higher year to run it—they have more experience than I do."

"Don't look at me," Fleur protested, noting where Harry had attempted to deflect the suggestion. "I can hold my own in defense, but Hermione's right—no one can match you, either in sheer power or understanding."

Harry's noncommittal shrug indicated an end to the discussion, and though Hermione would have liked to press the issue further, she sensed from Harry's demeanor that now was not the time. He was

very stubborn, and this issue appeared to be one in which he would dig in his heels. They would need to discuss it further at a later date. For now, the two Gryffindors were due for detention, so they finished their dinner and bade farewell to their companions, making their way toward the Transfiguration Professor's office.

The very next day was Hermione's birthday, and her friends in Gryffindor had planned a party, even inviting Luna to join them in the Gryffindor common room for the celebration. Though she knew Harry would never forget her birthday—he never had in their previous four years at Hogwarts—the fact that the rest of her friends also pitched in to make her birthday a special occasion touched her deeply.

They sat in a corner of the common room, drinking butterbeer—which the twins had somehow managed to procure—while eating snacks and birthday cake, provided by the ever-excitable Dobby. She had received presents from most of those with whom she was close, but none were as personal as the ones she had received from Harry and Fleur.

Harry had thoughtfully purchased her a set of personalized etching tools for her Runes class, knowing how much she enjoyed the class. Each tool was exquisitely hand-crafted and the entire set was stored in a fine lacquered case of dark cherry wood, with her name surrounded in delicate electrum filigree emblazoned along the lower right corner of the case. Harry jokingly told her that it was also in thanks for assisting him with his understanding of Runes, something for which she was surprised to note he had some aptitude.

As for Fleur, her new friend had purchased her a fine French charm bracelet with several charms. In particular, there was a stylized heart charm which had the inscription 'Toujours Amies' etched upon its surface. It was a thoughtful gift indeed, which prompted Hermione's teary thank you, in which she captured the French witch in a fierce embrace. Fleur had truly begun to become a good friend, and the two were becoming very close. Additionally, Hermione was thankful to Fleur for not pushing her to accept the arrangement she had proposed on the last day of summer holidays. Instead, she seemed willing to allow Hermione to consider it on her own, while always being available to talk if the other wished it.

It was truly the best birthday Hermione had ever had, and she stayed up quite late with all over her friends, talking and laughing, and for once, she allowed all thoughts of homework and classes to slip away in favor of simply having fun with her friends. It did not hurt, of course, that she had already finished everything due for that week.

As night wore on, more of her friends announced their intentions to retire, eventually leaving Hermione alone with Harry, Fleur, and Ron. Something about the way Ron had acted all evening—he had been quieter than normal, while watching her intently—suggested to Hermione that tonight would finally be the night he got off the fence and made whatever intentions he had toward her known. Hermione did not wish to hurt Ron—that was the last thing she wanted to do—but this continual doomed effort to get her to notice him was wearing on her, and she welcomed the opportunity to set the record straight.

Apparently Fleur had noticed the same thing. She glanced at Hermione and winked when the two boys exchanged a few words and she was certain they were not watching. She then stood and pulled Harry to his feet with her.

"I think it's time to go to bed," she suggested.

Harry smiled and nodded, turning to Ron. "Coming Ron?"

"That's... Well, what I mean to say is... erm..." Ron stammered incoherently, almost setting Fleur and Hermione to giggling. "I have... something... Yeah, something to... ask Hermione," the redhead finally finished, his cheeks turning pink with embarrassment.

Finally, that seemed to percolate its way through Harry's eternal obliviousness. He slyly grinned at Ron. "Oh, okay. If I don't see you before I go to sleep, have a good night."

Ron mumbled his agreement, while Harry and Fleur headed off together, parting at the stairs to head up to their respective dormitories.

Alone with Ron, Hermione waited patiently for several minutes for Ron to finally get up the courage to make his move. However, Ron just fidgeted and eyed her in what he probably thought was a surreptitious manner.

"Yes, Ron?" Hermione prompted gently. "You had something you wanted to ask me?"

"Umm... Yeah," was Ron's reply. "You know... we've been friends for a few years now, and I really... umm... I really like you, Hermione. And I kind of thought, what better day to... ask the girl you... like... to be your girlfriend... What better day than on her birthday?" he finished in a rush

"That's sweet, Ron," said Hermione. And it was—she had not thought he had it in him. But regardless of how much of a gentleman he was trying to be, Hermione would not be swayed.

"Yeah," he said with a grin. "I figured it would be a good idea, though the b—"

He stopped abruptly and his cheeks slightly pinked. Hermione had no idea what he was about to say—it almost sounded like he had had some advice from some other source. Regardless, it did not matter—if someone was encouraging him, then they were not seeing the true situation.

"So, now that you're my girlfriend, can I kiss you or something?"

That brought Hermione up short.

"Hold on, Ron!" she cried. He looked at her puzzled, no doubt wondering what he had done wrong.

"I'm sorry, Ron," she continued more gently, "but I'm afraid I have to say no."

"What?" a befuddled Ron asked, appearing shell-shocked.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Hermione repeated. "I understand your feelings, but mine aren't the same. I see you as a close brother, but nothing more."

Though his mouth moved soundlessly for a few moments, Hermione could see a hint of redness working its way up Ron's neck and ears, a sure sign that he was working up a head of steam.

"A brother?" Ron demanded. "I've been acting like as much of gentleman as I can, trying to learn what you like, how to make you happy, putting myself on the line here, and this is how you treat me?"

Hermione sighed—she could have predicted this was how Ron would respond.

"Ron," she said very gently, "I'm sorry, but I can't return your feelings."

Ron's jaw worked as he tried to control his anger, but when he finally spoke, his words did not make a lot of sense. "It won't happen, you know," Ron bit out.

Nonplused, Hermione tilted her head to one side. "I'm sorry?"

"Harry is already taken, Hermione, but it seems like you still have designs on him. You may as well give up your fantasy—he has no way to get out of his betrothal, so he'll never date you."

"You think I'm holding out for Harry," Hermione slowly repeated.

"It's obvious," was Ron's offhand reply. "I've seen you watching him, you know. You and I can be really good together, Hermione, and Harry's gone. I think you should go out with me."

Hermione forbore to mention that she knew about the possibility of a multiple marriage, not to mention the fact that Fleur was already trying to get her to enter into her own relationship with Harry. It would only make Ron even angrier and less willing to accept her rejection.

"Oh Ron, the reason I don't want to date you is not because of Harry," Hermione said firmly. "I am well aware of the marriage contract, and I know that Harry is tied to it. I am not hoping that Harry will date me when he already has Fleur—Harry is too honorable to cheat on her like that, and I wouldn't do that to Fleur, either."

"Then why won't you go out with me? I'm as good as Harry." His voice had taken on a slightly whining quality as he tried to wheedle her into a relationship.

"I told you, Ron, I don't think we are compatible. And you shouldn't compare yourself with Harry—it makes it very clear that you still have some jealousy issues with him. I was not comparing you and Harry, and neither should you."

"I am not jealous of Harry," Ron denied vehemently, his voice becoming rather loud.

"Ron, just listen to me," Hermione pleaded, leaning closer to him and lowering her voice. "I think that a lot of your behavior around Harry—especially since the Tri-Wizard—has been because of your jealousy. You shouldn't feel jealous of him—he doesn't want his fame, or anything that comes with it, you know."

"You just have to bring up the tournament again, don't you?" said Ron. "I already said I was wrong—what more do you want?"

"I don't want anything, Ron," was Hermione's simple reply. "I was not the one who was hurt when you called Harry a liar. You may think that it's water under the bridge, but I can tell you that Harry still doesn't trust you fully like he used to. You never really discussed the situation or apologized to him, and I think that you should so you can both finally put it behind you."

"But... But... Harry told me just to forget it!" Ron said hotly.

"But that's just Harry, Ron," Hermione rejoined. "You know how he is. Despite what he said, though, he was still hurt by it, and you owe him an apology."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "You've been talking with Harry about this stuff behind my back?"

"No, Ron," Hermione responded firmly. "I know how Harry feels, but he has never told me."

"You're changing the subject."

"I think it's more proper to say that I've changed the subject, but I think you needed to hear this," said Hermione, injecting as much firmness into her voice as she could. "Regardless, my feelings for



any of my friends are my private concern, and are not up for discussion.

"Ron," she repeated, kindly, "I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have no romantic feelings for you. We are so different—we would make a really poor match. Please get over this so we can stay friends."

But Ron was not about to let it go without a final word. "What do you mean we are a poor match?" he demanded.

"Think about it, Ron," said an exasperated Hermione. "We argue and bicker all the time, we have little in common, and we don't like to do the same things."

"But everyone says the arguing makes us sound like an old married couple."

Hermione shook her head. "They don't know what they are talking about. Real successful marriages are built on love and mutual respect, not on arguing. Do you see your parents arguing all the time like we do?"

"Mum and Dad argue," was Ron's defensive reply.

"Of course they do! All couples have times when they don't agree. But their arguing doesn't define their relationship. Our relationship is not the close, affectionate one that couples should share, and if we argue this badly now, it would just get worse after we start dating. We would eventually split up, and that might even ruin our friendship."

At his look of incomprehension, Hermione threw her hands up in the air. "Really, Ron, can you imagine us married to one another? What would you do if you came home one day and I wanted to discuss the latest Arithmantic formula I was working on? And you know how little I think of Quidditch. Do you really want a wife who could not care less about your favorite sport?"

A contemplative look appeared on Ron's face—for the first time, he appeared to be thinking about Hermione's words, rather than only about what he wanted. It was a start, Hermione decided.

"Anyway, thank you for asking, Ron, but I don't think it's a good idea. I hope we can stay friends."

With that, Hermione bid her friend good night and headed toward the stairs and the dormitories. She hated hurting him, but knew it was for the best.

She stepped onto the stairs and made her way up to the fifth year girls' dormitories, and was surprised to see Fleur sitting on the landing, watching her approach, an expression of sympathy etched on her face.

"He asked?" she queried quietly.

Hermione nodded, feeling tears begin to run down her face.

"Ah, mon amie," Fleur said, while drawing Hermione into a hug. "It is hard, but you have done the right thing. He is a good friend, no?"

"Usually," said Hermione while dabbing at her eyes. "He can be a little flaky at times, but at the end of the day you always know he'll be there."

"Then if he is a true friend, he will accept your decision and allow your friendship to remain intact. If he is not..."

Fleur's final thought remained unvoiced, but Hermione knew what she was about to say in any case. It did not make it any easier to hear, but Hermione knew the older witch was correct.

"Thank you, Fleur, but I think I'd like to go to bed now."

"Sleep well," Fleur said, kissing her softly on both cheeks before she departed to her own dormitory.

As Hermione entered her own room, she reflected that the day had generally been a good one. And regardless of the way it had ended, she had faith that Ron would come to his senses and get over his disappointment. It might take some time, but he would eventually get there.

A/N: The most important thing in this chapter is that you get a glimpse of the new and improved—and more confident—Harry. The

thing that has always bothered me about the books more than anything else, is the fact that JKR neutered Harry. He couldn't even win without Voldemort screwing up, for crying out loud! I am trying to correct that for this story and the first step in that is to give Harry a bit of a backbone. If his conversation with Snape troubles you, remember that he asked for it to be completely off the record. I believe that one thing Snape can respect is a person who is willing to stick up for themselves—call it Snape's inner Gryffindor, if you will, though the man himself would likely emasculate anyone who dared to compare him to a lion.

I did want to respond to an anonymous reviewer who signed as "PC", and note that though the review was rather long and convoluted, I did not just delete it as a bunch of rambling and incomprehensible words. Once I went back and read through it a couple of times and figured out what he was saying, I had to admit that he got a lot of it right. I will point out that I have not actually gotten a lot of negative feedback on this story—in fact, the response has been generally positive—I am just the type who gets very annoyed with people who complain about a story because I am not writing it to their tastes, and people who complain about certain events which they interpret in some way, but for which they do not yet have all the necessary information. We are in chapter 14 of a 60+ chapter story. You can assume that you don't know everything yet.

The reviewer's suggestion of how to read the last chapter was a very good one. You do have to be very careful when you read Dumbledore's thoughts before and after his confrontation with Snape. I have been very clear in stating—not only in the story, but also in the author's note of the previous chapter—that Dumbledore understands that Snape is a liability in his position, but he keeps Snape in it because the man has not done anything overt which would necessitate his removal. Keep in mind that this is the first time Harry has ever complained about the bat's behavior. Moreover, the most important consideration at this point in Dumbledore's mind is that he feels that he will need every arrow in his quiver in order to see Voldemort defeated, and Snape is definitely one of those arrows. You may disagree with this, but it is Dumbledore's motivation in this story. There is also an additional consideration to which I alluded in the previous chapter, but which will not be revealed for quite some time yet.

Finally, I wanted to say something about word choice. The reviewer noted I had used the term "circumspect" when both Dumbledore and McGonagall described Snape's behavior. I cannot remember what I was thinking when I wrote those sections, so I will not be able to confirm his conjecture. What I can tell everyone reading this, however, is that I am generally very picky about my word choice. I have been known to agonize over words at times, and I stubbornly search for the exact word which fits what I am trying to say. In this particular case, I too looked through Word's thesaurus, as well as a couple of online tools, and I agree with his sentiments—"circumspect" is exactly the term which conveys what I was trying to say. If the previous chapter did not sit quite right with you, go ahead and read over it in the manner that PC suggests, and I hope that it will make better sense.

I will make one more statement. I encourage everyone reading this story to suspend their knowledge of certain parts of canon—this is an AU, after all. In my opinion, one of the biggest challenges in writing an HP story which takes up at some point during the books, is to justify Dumbledore's actions as I believe JKR intended the man to be read. Quite frankly it's easy to make him into a closet Pureblood supremacist, an evil git who is trying to rule the wizarding world himself, a glory hog who tries to ensure Harry dies then take Voldemort out himself, or many of the other fanfiction clichés out there. But it is very difficult, in light of some of the things Dumbledore has done, to carry on his character as a kindly old man who does his best and makes mistakes, while still essentially being a manipulative, secretive character. So as I said before, while I have tried to fill in all the holes, if you remember something in canon which directly contradicts something I have written, or if there is an instance from canon where Snape blatantly crosses the line which you feel I did not take into account, please assume that Harry's perception was coloring the event and made it worse than it actually was. Conversely, please also feel free to point out anything which contradicts something in canon (from the first four books, obviously), because I'm not perfect and I may have missed something.

One of these days maybe I'll actually be able to get away without a monster author's note...

## Chapter 15 – Sweet Freedom

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said as he plopped down beside her on their favorite sofa in the common room. It was still fairly early and the room was still mostly deserted; Fleur and their other friends had yet to make an appearance.

"Hi Harry," Hermione said with a smile, before she turned back to her book.

Harry smiled at her, noting to himself that seeing Hermione without a book in her hands was the same as a unicorn without a horn.

He studied her surreptitiously, wondering if he should say something to her. Contrary to popular belief, Harry was not truly unobservant—he merely did not always interpret the evidence before him in a correct manner. This defect was especially exacerbated in the case of anything of a family or intrapersonal nature, mostly due to his upbringing with the Dursleys. The Dursleys were not an overly demonstrative family; other than their sickening—and rather contrived, Harry felt—displays of affection for Dudley, Harry had rarely been able to discern anything in their actions which even displayed the barest of affection for each other, never mind anyone else. As such, growing up in such an environment and doing his best to avoid their notice, and consequently any unpleasantness, Harry was not precisely equipped to be an expert on interpersonal relationships and the common signs most people unconsciously displayed to betray their true emotions.

The past few weeks, though, Ron's display had been so blatant that Harry could not imagine that a blind man would have been unable to see through it. Harry would have noticed even if Ron had not approached him to ask his feelings about Hermione. And given the words which had been exchanged the evening before, and the way that Fleur had practically dragged him away from his two closest friends, it appeared that Ron had finally worked up the courage to ask Hermione out.

; In truth, Harry was of two minds about the development. They were his closest friends, and he wanted them to be happy. However, with all the fighting they did, he was not sure that they would work as a couple, and did not wish to become caught between them as had so

often happened in the past. Of paramount importance, however, was the fact that Harry could not stand to see Hermione hurt...

"Something on your mind, Harry?"

Broken out of his reverie, Harry noted Hermione's smirk; obviously he had not been as subtle as he had thought. Hermione was too observant for her own good.

"I was just wondering if I should be congratulating you this morning."

Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion. "For what, Harry?"

"You know..." he trailed off, making vague hand gestures. "You and Ron?"

At that Hermione burst out laughing, causing Harry some confusion in turn. "What?"

"Oh, Harry, I think you may have mistaken a few things."

By now Harry was completely perplexed. Had he truly misunderstood the situation that badly? "Ron didn't ask you out?"

"He did, but I told him I don't see him like that," was Hermione's response. "I mean, can you imagine us as a couple? I'd be hexing him before the end of the honeymoon!"

Grinning, Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Personally, I would have guessed before the end of the reception, but I'll bow to your superior knowledge. And I'll have you know that I may be a little more observant than you think. Ron's actions the past few weeks haven't exactly been subtle."

"No they haven't," Hermione agreed. "But if you're so observant, I would have thought you would have seen how little encouragement I gave him."

Thinking about it for a moment, Harry understood what Hermione was telling him. "I may not have noticed as you say, but I was trying not to step on Ron's toes, in my own defense. I also wasn't convinced you would be good together, but I thought that you might actually give him a chance."

"I can't," was Hermione's prim response. "You know how he can be. If I had agreed he would almost have considered me to be his property. If I so much as talked with another boy he would get jealous, and when it came time to break up with him—which would happen, sooner rather than later—it would have been almost impossible to get him to let go. It's better this way."

Harry held his hands out in surrender. "I understand, Hermione. Obviously you've given this a lot of thought. You do know that he'll be quite resentful, at least for the time being."

A sigh met his declaration. "I know that Harry, but it's best to get this out of the way now so we can continue to be friends."

She was quietly contemplative for several moments and Harry, sensing that she had more to say and was trying to interpret her own feelings, allowed her to think. He had never been in such a situation before—it could not be an easy one.

"I didn't want to hurt him," she finally confided in a soft voice. "He is my friend, regardless of how he has acted at times. I tried to let him down easily and explain to him how poorly suited we were; I'm sure I had him thinking at the end, but I'm well aware that he will need to work it all through in his own mind before he will begin to accept it."

"You did the right thing," said Harry.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "Is this coming from Harry Potter, the new student of the human heart?"

"No," he responded, not being drawn into her playful words. "It's just Harry Potter, who has an appreciation for his friend and understands that she knows what she wants."

At his statement a shadow passed across Hermione's face, and she blushed and ducked her head in apparent embarrassment. Harry was dumbfounded—he had only said the truth, had he not? She had rejected Ron's advances because she was certain they would not work; was she second-guessing her decision?

It was better for him to ignore it, he decided. If she wished to confide in him the reason for her sudden reaction, he had no doubt she

would. Until then, he would give her enough space to work it out for herself.

True to Harry's prediction, Ron was distant that day, and for several more to come. He was not precisely petulant; he seemed, rather, to be unusually pensive and thoughtful, and though he peered at Hermione at times and appeared to be decidedly unhappy, Harry had the distinct impression that he was much more reflective than resentful. Harry was simply glad that he was not required to referee again between them, as he would have thought would have been the result of such an event.

Fleur, however, appeared to be a constant comfort for Hermione, and given his fiancée's actions the previous night, he suspected that Fleur was not only well aware of what had occurred between Ron and Hermione, but that she had actively been giving counsel to Hermione. Harry hoped that Ron never realized that as Harry suspected that Fleur's advice had not been in Ron's favor. That would not likely endear her to the redhead, regardless of how starry-eyed he still sometimes became due to the effects of her allure.

They sat companionably, the earlier solemn subject of conversation now forgotten in favor of lighter topics, until Fleur had joined them in the common room. When they made their way down to the Great Hall, they found a rather unwelcome surprise waiting for them outside their destination—something unexpected which caused them to stop and take notice.

Attached to the wall at the side of the entrance to the Great Hall were several large wooden cases, locked with large, old-fashioned padlocks. The cases each had a glass door set into their casings, showing yellowed parchments inside. The trio looked at one another and approached the boxes, looking inside the one closest to the door. It read in big, block script:

Proclamation

Educational Decree #1

For their own safety, all students enrolled at Hogwarts shall not be allowed to cast dangerous hexes and curses.

Any student found in contravention of this decree shall be expelled.

"What is an educational decree?" asked Fleur after some moments.



"I don't know," was Hermione's response. "I've never seen or heard of anything like this."

A quick investigation showed that the other cases held similar "Educational Decrees," though none were as serious as the first. In fact, most of the others were somewhat silly, ranging from the allowed amount of paper and quills to be carried in one's bag, to the required quantity of socks to be owned by each student, to the prohibition of any "unapproved sweets," though just exactly what constituted unapproved was not stated.

The trio exchanged another glance before they entered the Great Hall and sat about halfway down the length of the table. They ate their breakfast, discussing what they had seen in a quiet manner. In time, all the members of the group had joined them at their table, and it was obvious that everyone had seen the proclamations on their way in.

It was the work of but a moment to come to the consensus agreement that the decrees must be the work of Umbridge, and likely constituted the beginnings of her attempt to enforce the ministry's authority over the school.

As Hermione said, "She has really not done much of anything yet, other than refuse to teach us anything, and somehow I doubt that that is what Fudge had in mind when he sent her here."

Sage nods met her declaration but Harry frowned. "But what is she up to? A few stupid declarations will hardly allow her to discredit Dumbledore."

It was of course a question which no one could answer. For Umbridge to truly take control of the school—if that was her objective—then she would need to do away with Dumbledore in some manner, and no one here could see how she could possibly accomplish such a feat. Harry's trial had backfired seriously on the Minister, and Dumbledore's popularity—not to mention Harry's—had not suffered the serious hit that Fudge no doubt intended. She would have to prove him somehow unsuited for the position, or directly in violation of school charter or Ministry law, a task which appeared difficult to pull off, given Dumbledore's years of service and his record over the years. It was not like she could just challenge him to a duel—no one with their head on straight could possibly consider a

frumpy, dumpy little woman with an obsessive fondness for pink to be the equal of the famed defeater of Grindelwald.

They went to their classes after breakfast with no further inclination as to what Umbridge could be trying to accomplish, but possessed of a determination to watch her very carefully.

As the day wore on, Harry found that his mind could not stay focused on such mundane thoughts, as another more important event was looming on the horizon. The next day was to be Sirius's trial, and for the remainder of the day, Harry became more and more distracted. Not so distracted, however, that he did not notice his friends' reactions. Fleur and Hermione were, if anything, even more affectionate and understanding than they would normally be, while most of his other friends—excluding Ron, of course, who was largely keeping to himself—just murmured their support and allowed him his thoughts. Harry was grateful for their forbearance and understanding.

His distraction became even worse the following morning. As the trial was not scheduled to begin until two hours after noon, they still had to attend their morning classes. Unfortunately, that morning was potions and Harry, not wishing to bring Snape down on him for any reason, forced himself to at least pay a modicum of attention. Luckily, there was no brewing that day—Mondays were generally reserved for brewing, while Thursday was Snape's theory and preparation day—so Harry did not have to try to create a working brew, which he knew would have failed spectacularly, given the circumstances. And Snape, perhaps understanding Harry's anxiety—or perhaps still remembering his recent set down—largely left Harry to himself.

One event which surprised most of the students present occurred as the class was ending. Apparently the difference in Harry's normal routine was noticed from an unwelcome quarter—one who had no problem heckling Harry over it.

"Hey Scarface," the annoying tones of Draco Malfoy's voice rang out over the room while the students were packing up. "What's the matter? Your doxy won't put out for you?"

Harry spun around, the need to regulate his emotions instantly forgotten. He was ready to slam Malfoy's teeth down his throat when another voice interrupted him.

"That will be enough, Mr. Malfoy."

The entire class stopped what they were doing and turned to stare at the potions master. Was Snape actually defending Harry Potter?

No less astonished was the cause of the disturbance himself. The boy's eyes were wide open and his mouth appeared about ready to hit the floor. "Professor—"

Snape's eyebrow rose, neatly cutting whatever the Malfoy scion was about to say. "Was I unclear? You will not use unacceptable language while you are in my classroom."

Several emotions seemed to pass over Malfoy's face all at once, not the least of which included shock, embarrassment and rage. Finally he turned his attention away from the professor who had just set him down for perhaps the first time, and threw his books into his pack in a rage.

"Crabbe! Goyle! Let's get out of here!" he snapped as he stalked from the room, forcing the two goons to hurry to catch him.

Harry turned toward Professor Snape, his face carefully neutral, and nodded to the man when he saw the other returning his gaze. Snape's only response was a tight nod of his own, before he turned and strode into his office, cloak billowing behind him.

"I never thought I'd see the day," Ron blurted.

Agreeing with him wholeheartedly, Harry accompanied his friends from the room and toward the Great Hall for lunch, while thinking about Snape's words to Malfoy. Obviously, the bat was still on what passed for his best behavior otherwise he would simply have sat back and watched the confrontation with glee. It did not escape Harry's attention, however, that Snape had only reprimanded Malfoy for his language, and not for the sentiments he expressed. Clearly the changes in the man only went so far.

An hour later, the three friends said good bye to everyone else and made their way toward Dumbledore's office, where they would Floo to the Ministry. At first, Dumbledore had been disinclined to allow Hermione's attendance. Fleur was allowed because her father was involved and she was Harry's betrothed, but Hermione was no

relation to Harry or to Sirius. However, the Headmaster was persuaded to relent when Harry correctly pointed out that she had been an integral part of Sirius's rescue at the end of third year, and thus, was connected to him in an important way.

They arrived in the office, returning Dumbledore's affable greeting, and moment and a quick Floo trip later, they were all making their way through the Ministry building toward the courtrooms on the tenth level.

It was different, Harry reflected, to see courtroom number ten from the vantage point of the gallery. The last time he had been in that room, he had been front and center and had not had much time to survey the surroundings. However, one thing he could detect was a much different atmosphere than he remembered from two months earlier. For one thing, the air of implacability which Fudge had injected into Harry's trial had been replaced by curiosity. Sirius Black had been a rather large figure in magical England for some time, after all. He was the rumored betrayer of the Potters, and by extension the Boy-Who-Lived, who had then had escaped not only from Azkaban, but from Hogwarts when he was due to be kissed, and then had his innocence summarily declared at Harry's trial. The interested level in this trial was incredibly high.

They had only been seated for a moment when Jean-Sebastian entered the room. Spying them, he stepped forward and engulfed his daughter in a hug, then slapped Harry's back and nodded at Hermione.

"You all are looking... eager today," he said with a grin.

Harry could not help the bashful feeling which swept over him, causing Jean-Sebastian to laugh.

"Do not worry, Harry. Sirius will walk from this courtroom today a free man. I've already seen him questioned under Veritaserum, as you recall. I know he's innocent, even if I hadn't already known."

Harry rolled his eyes at his new protector, but Jean-Sebastian simply smirked and left them to join Dumbledore on the floor of the courtroom.

"He's right, Harry," Hermione said softly from his side. "There's nothing to worry about."

From his other side, Fleur reached out and grasped his hand. "Veritaserum cannot be beaten, Harry."

Gratefully, Harry nodded his appreciation for their support. But that did not help him from feeling nervous. Of course not.

In a small anteroom off the main courtroom, Sirius Black waited, and though he was not aware of the fact, he was every bit as nervous as his godson. Sirius knew he was innocent—he had clung to that truth with an almost fanatical fervency since he had come to his senses at the beginning of those horrible years in Azkaban. The thought of his innocence, along with the protection his Animagus form afforded him, had kept him sane all those years. Of course, Moony and Prongs would have claimed otherwise when it came to the subject of his sanity...

Smiling, Sirius thought of his friends, and how they had planned to storm the world and make it a better place. Their unique backgrounds—James with his status as the heir of an old and respected house, Sirius as the rebellious scion of a historically dark house, and Remus who had been ostracized his entire life for a condition which was not his fault—gave them—or so they felt—the necessary insight into the evils of their society. Things must change or their world was in danger of becoming an anachronism and collapsing in on itself.

Even though many years had passed since James's death and the acute ache of his passing had dulled with the passage of time, Sirius could still feel an empty hole where James's presence had once been, and he knew Moony felt the same. In some respects, Harry had begun to fill that hole, though Sirius knew he would never fully be able to do so. Harry was different from James, and would therefore occupy a different location in Sirius's heart than James had.

But perhaps all their dreams were not dead. Harry was a bright and exceptional person, and perhaps with his help, not to mention the assistance of his fame and influence—which was not inconsiderable—they could still realize their dreams. Harry, Sirius was certain, had not yet begun to think of what would happen after

Voldemort was defeated; all of his thoughts and energy was bent toward that one goal, not to mention the need to survive the coming difficulties. Sirius, based on the thoughts and plans he had had with his friends, wanted to change their society, and was certain that once he shared his thoughts, Harry would agree. This did not even mention the enthusiasm the little Muggleborn girl he always hung out with would bring. She would, no doubt, see even more clearly than Harry that the wizarding world needed to change if they were to survive and do away with the conditions which contributed to the rise of several previous dark lords.

One thing Sirius knew beyond all others, however, was that James and Lily were still looking down on their son. And he knew their greatest wish was that regardless of his mistakes—specifically that of chasing after Pettigrew when he should have concerned himself with Harry—that Sirius finally take his role of Harry's defender, with Moony occupying a large role in the young man's life as well. And that was what Sirius was determined to do. After he was declared a free man, of course...

Turning his attention to the matter at hand, Sirius thought of the upcoming trial. Trials in the magical world were not the same as the descriptions of those in the Muggle world he had heard from Lily. They were both more efficient and more effective than those the Muggles held, due to their ability to use magic to determine the truth. This was a trial in front of the entire Wizengamot, and though Sirius would have an advocate—Jean-Sebastian had agreed to take the role as they had decided Dumbledore would be of more use running the trial as Chief Warlock—it would not be the advocate's responsibility to prove his client's innocence. If the case was important or sensational enough—which his was in spades, on both accounts—the release of Veritaserum would be authorized and the person on trial would be compelled magically to either convict or acquit himself.

Unfortunately, what was not admissible was Sirius's conviction that Peter was the actual betrayer of Lily and James. A person could only speak what they believed to be the truth, which was why Veritaserum could not be used in testimony against anyone else.

In other words, Sirius was not Peter, and as he was not Peter and could not know Peter's thoughts, feelings or motivations, and

therefore only Peter could convict himself under the influence of Veritaserum.

Now, the fact that Sirius had been present when Lily cast the Fidelius and saw her make Pettigrew the secret keeper would be damning, as would the subsequent events that led to the Potters' deaths. However, since Sirius had immediately left James and Lily and had not returned until after their deaths, he could not say for certain that the secret keeper had not been changed once again. After all, they had used one piece of misdirection—who was to say James and Lily had not done it once again?

His testimony was, however, enough evidence that a warrant would be issued for the arrest of the traitorous rat. Some day, he would be made to pay for his crimes against James and Lily. In Sirius's mind, this was Marauder justice—betrayal would be met with the harshest penalty possible.

The door opened and into the room stepped an Auror—one who he would have known well, if he had been free instead of in Azkaban.

"Sirius, it's time," Nymphadora Tonks said, her hair flickering to a solemn black from the platinum blond she had originally sported.

"Hello, Dora," he responded.

She stared at him hard, no doubt wondering if this new nickname he had come up with for her was intended to tease.

"What, would you prefer that I call you Nymphy?" Sirius asked with a chuckle

"Certainly not!" Tonks snapped, sending Sirius into even greater peals of laughter.

"Then you'll have to put up with it. It's certainly a lot better than you ridiculously insisting that everyone call you by your last name."

The newly christened Dora's expression became even darker. But she said nothing, only motioning him to the door. Sirius stood and walked towards the door, stopping when he had reached his cousin.

"Thanks, Dora," he said. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you better."

She cocked her head to one side. "My mother always had good things to say about you, Sirius. She never believed that you were guilty."

Sirius smiled. "I always said Andy was the best of her sisters. Thank you."

Turning, Sirius walked out through the hallway and into the courtroom, holding his head high, while Dora and another Auror flanked him on either side. Feeling the eyes of everyone in the chamber bearing down on him, Sirius, calling up a hint of the old Marauder spirit, directed a saucy wave at the Minister, before smiling at Harry and the two girls by his godson's side. The smile was returned somewhat nervously by the young man, but with real hope shining in his eyes. Sirius vowed right there to be worthy of his godson's hope.

The Minister was clearly not amused. He sat there, leaning back in his seat, gazing petulantly at the display Sirius was making. The Minister truly had no political skin in the game when it came to Sirius's imprisonment—he had not been the Minister when Sirius had been imprisoned, and thus could not be held responsible, unless one counted the negligence which had kept anyone in any position of power from reviewing his case., and Fudge was not the only one guilty of that oversight. It appeared that the Minister's displeasure stemmed more from his connection to Harry Potter. Anything which benefitted Harry was an anathema in his eyes.

Approaching the center of the room where Jean-Sebastian waited, Sirius instantly he noticed that chair with its restraints, which he remembered from his own time as an Auror, was missing, and a straight-backed wooden chair had replaced it. He raised his eyebrow at Jean-Sebastian in question.

"I would not allow Harry to sit in that demeaning chair, do you think I would allow you to do so?" he queried good-naturedly.

"I'm surprised Fudge allowed it."



Jean-Sebastian snorted with some disdain. "In this instance he did not have much of a choice or any real reason to argue. Your absence has left you less than informed, but this trial is almost being considered a formality. Madam Bones felt there was no need for restraints, as you were turning yourself in for trial."

"I always knew I liked her," said Sirius, with a smile for the Bones matron. She returned it, before returning to her conversation with Dumbledore.

As Sirius took his seat in the chair, the courtroom quieted and the attention moved to the Chief Warlock who was now standing to begin the proceedings.

"Ladies, Gentlemen of the Wizengamot, I believe we are ready to begin. I call this trial for Sirius Black in session." He peered down at Sirius with a slight smile on his face. "Thank you for giving yourself up to the judgment of this court."

"Of course, Chief Warlock," replied Sirius. "I am very interested in having my name cleared, and resuming my place in this society."

"Very well. We shall begin." Dumbledore motioned toward Madam Bones. "Director, if you will."

Madam Bones rose to her feet and took her place before the lectern. "Sirius Orion Black, you are called today before Wizengamot of Great Britain to answer to the charges brought against you. Those charges include the betrayal of James Potter, Lily Potter and Harry Potter to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and thereby causing the deaths of Lily and James. You have also been charged with the killing of Peter Pettigrew and the murder of thirteen Muggles during your confrontation with the aforementioned Peter Pettigrew. How do you plead?"

"Innocent of all charges, Madam Director," said Sirius.

"Mr. Black," she responded, peering down at him severely through her monocle, "you understand that the release of Veritaserum has been authorized, and that you will be magically compelled to prove your innocence?"

"I do." Sirius's eyes became a little misty for a moment as he remembered his fallen friend. "James Potter was my closest friend growing up, and by my seventh year, Lily was like a sister. I would have turned a killing curse on myself before I hurt either of them."

Madam Bones's scrutiny continued for several seconds before she motioned the nearby Aurors. "Very well then. Auror Dawlish, if you will administer the Veritaserum please."

It was a quirk of Veritaserum—or perhaps it was so designed—but it was known that the counter-agent could not be taken before the truth agent. If taken in the wrong order, Veritaserum and the counter-agent would form a highly toxic poison, from which a person could only be saved if the attention of a highly skilled healer or a bezoar was available immediately. That was why a defendant was not tested first for the counter-agent—the effects were well known.

Tilting his head back, Sirius allowed the Auror to place the requisite three drops on his tongue. He felt the haze of the Veritaserum take effect immediately—he was still in command of his faculties and was completely aware, but any falsehood he might have harbored disappeared from his mind. He could not even think up a lie, which was why the truth agent was so powerful—it did not affect the speech of the recipient, rather it affected their very mind, will, and being, and no known potion or force of will was able to defeat it.

He focused on Madam Bones as she peered at him. After a moment, she appeared to be satisfied that the potion had taken affect.

"Please state your name."

"Sirius Orion Black."

"Very well, Mr. Black. Did you, on the night of October 31, 1981, betray James, Lily and Harry Potter to You-Know-Who with the intent of causing their deaths?"

"No." Sirius wanted to say more, but the power of the truth serum was forcing him to reply only to the question asked.

"Were you secret keeper to their location?"

"No."

"Why were you thought to be their secret keeper?"

"James and I thought that I was the obvious choice," Sirius responded, happy to finally be able to tell his story. "We let it be known that I was to be the secret keeper, but we switched at the last moment with Peter Pettigrew."

"Why did you do this?"

"Misdirection. You-Know-Who would concentrate on finding me, while Peter would be able to go into hiding. No one would ever suspect James of entrusting his safety to Peter, as he was not known to be the most competent or courageous of wizards."

"Were you actually present during the casting of the charm?"

"I was."

"And what of the charges of killing Peter Pettigrew? Did you kill him?"

"No."

"Then how was he able to make it seem that you had? What happened during your confrontation?"

"When I cornered Peter, he was holding his wand behind his back. He yelled at me, accusing me of betraying James and Lily, and cast a blasting curse which tore through a pipe and caused an explosion which killed the Muggles. Then he cut off his own finger to make it appear like the rest of his body had been consumed in the blast and disappeared."

"Why didn't you tell this to the Aurors who apprehended you?"

"I was disoriented by the explosion, and by the time I came to my senses, I was already inside my cell at Azkaban."

Madam Bones regarded him for a long moment before she continued. "And what of your escaped from Azkaban? Why did you escape? And if you were able to escape, why did you wait so long?"

"I became desperate when learned that Peter Pettigrew was close to Harry. It was that desperation which drove me to attempt it."

"How did learn of this?" Madam Bones interrupted.

"During the Minister's annual tour of Azkaban, he left me with a copy of his Daily Prophet. I saw a picture of Peter Pettigrew with the Weasleys, and knowing he would be at Hogwarts this year, I knew I had to get close to Harry to protect him."

"I seem to remember that edition," said Madam Bones with a frown. "The picture of the Weasley family was on the front cover, yet it would have been obvious that a man believed to be dead for over a decade could not have openly appeared in the picture. Yet you claim you saw him?"

"Yes."

"Please explain."

"Peter Pettigrew is a rat animagus. I saw him in the picture perched on Ronald Weasley's shoulder."

The Director's nodded thoughtfully. "Are you saying that Peter Pettigrew lived as a rat with the Weasley family since his apparent demise?"

"I have no knowledge of how and when he came to be living with the Weasleys. However, I am positive it was him."

"How can you be certain?" Madam Bones pressed.

"I have seen the rat in his animagus form many times, Madam Bones," Sirius responded, a hint of dryness entering his voice regardless of the truth agent. "Besides that, he was also missing a toe on his left forepaw, which is the hand which Peter cut his finger off. I also saw him at Hogwarts in his human form."

"So you went to Hogwarts to protect Harry?"

"Yes, but also to capture or kill the rat if I could."

"Let's return to your escape. How did you manage it?"

"I changed into my animagus form and squeezed through the bars of my cell."

Her eyebrows rose. "You are an animagus as well?"

"Yes."

"And what is your form?"

"A black grim."

"That's not ironic at all," Madam Bones responded in a dry manner.

"A grim with the name Sirius Black—that's something one could hardly have planned had you even attempted to do so. Do you not agree?"

"Yes," Sirius said. "My friends certainly teased me often enough for it."

"What did you do then?"

"I evaded the Dementors—which wasn't difficult, as they practically ignored me as a dog—then I swam ashore."

"Is that how you continued to evade the Dementors who were sent to apprehend you?"

"It is."

Halting her questioning there, Madam Bones peered about the room, before stopping at Dumbledore. "Chief Warlock, I believe that I have no further questions to ask Mr. Black at this time, though I would ask that he meet with me at a later date, as I would like to ask him some further questions, which perhaps should not be made public. In addition, I would recommend that we begin the search for the whereabouts of Peter Pettigrew."

Dumbledore rose and signaled to Dawlish, who immediately administered the counter agent. Immediately, Sirius felt the compulsion to tell the truth wane.

"I trust the information I provided was what you were looking for?" he asked cheekily.

A murmur of laughter swept over the assembled members, and Dumbledore's eyes twinkled madly.

"I believe so, Mr. Black."

Dumbledore's gaze then swept over the courtroom. "Is there anyone who wishes to say anything further before we take a vote?"

Though Dumbledore addressed the entire room, he directed his gaze at Fudge who, although he appeared to be less than pleased with the proceedings, made no comment—clearly there was to be no outburst from the Minister regarding the matter.

"In that case, I move that in light of Mr. Black's testimony under the influence of Veritaserum, that the charges against him be dropped. I believe the evidence is convincing enough to eschew a vote in favor of a proclamation by general acclamation. Does anyone object?"

Sirius grinned at the Chief Warlock. A proclamation by general acclamation was considered to be superior to a unanimous vote, as the evidence was deemed so airtight that a vote was not required. No one would ever question his exoneration, and the Ministry reparations would likely be substantially higher based on this development.

When no one spoke, Dumbledore banged his gavel against the desk. "So proclaimed. Sirius Black, we find you not guilty of all charges against you."

A whoop of joy sounded from Harry's direction, and Dumbledore allowed himself an indulgent smile at the young man. "I will not keep you much longer, as I understand there will be quite a celebration occurring tonight. However, there is one other matter to discuss.

"Through the course of today's testimony, we have learned that you have broken the law in at least one instance. For failing to register yourself as an animagus, the penalty is normally a stay in Azkaban. In light of the fact that you have already spent a considerable amount of time there, I believe we can rule that your sentence has already been served. However, the court will give you sixty days to

present yourself at the Ministry and register yourself, or other action may be taken against you. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"As for any reparations in the matter of your unjust imprisonment, perhaps we should confront that matter at another time? Do you agree?"

Sirius smirked and looked at the Minister, who appeared as though he had swallowed something rather unpleasant. "I believe that is acceptable to me, Chief Warlock. Please inform me of the appropriate time, and I will meet with you and the Minister.

"And Madam Bones," he continued, turning his attention to the Director of Law Enforcement, "I would be more than happy to meet with you at any time convenient. Please owl me and we can set up a time."

Madam Bones nodded, while Dumbledore peered about the room. "Does anyone in the august body have anything else to add at this time?"

Again, after a moment of silence, Dumbledore banged his gavel and dismissed the assembled.

Standing up from his chair, a beaming Sirius caught his godson in a hug, as Harry ran to him the moment the gavel sounded.

"Hey there, Pup! Didn't you have any faith in me?"

"In you, yes," Harry replied. He cast a significant look at Fudge. "Not in him."

"Even he is bound by the laws. He may try to circumvent them, but in the end the procedure in this case was clear, and there was nothing he could do to derail it without looking bad himself."

"I'm just happy it's over," said Harry.

"So am I, Pup. So am I."

They reconvened at the Ambassador's manor shortly after Sirius was pronounced free, and were treated to a celebratory dinner cooked up by the Delacour house elves. The atmosphere was jubilant, and the company was able to relax now that the specter of the manhunt for Sirius had been removed.

Among the subjects discussed that night were the events of the early school year, which was of particular interest to both Sirius and the Delacours. And though they were both displeased at the antics of Madam Umbridge—and to a lesser extent Professor Snape—they were also pleased with the way the students had handled the matters thus far and the support the Headmaster had given them. Sirius in particular was interested in the report of Harry's confrontation with Snape, and the manner in which Snape had reprimanded Draco that very morning. He warned them to watch out for the greasy git—he did not think the man's behavior would continue, nor did he think that the man had changed to any degree. The fact that all appeared to be well thus far did not stop the adults from cautioning the teens once again and reminding them that they were available at any time, should either professor become a serious problem.

The decision was also made that Sirius would return to France to continue his treatment and rehabilitation for the years of malnutrition and mental distress he had suffered during his time in Azkaban. Harry in particular was unhappy that Sirius would not be nearby, but as Jean-Sebastian pointed out, Harry would have to return to school and Sirius would not be able to be nearby anyway. Sirius promised that he would see them at Christmas, and expressed his hope that he would be able to return to England by the time the New Year rolled around. He also told Harry he hoped to be able to take up his guardianship as soon as possible, and begin to fulfill the responsibility which James and Lily had entrusted to him. Needless to say, that suggestion was accepted enthusiastically by Harry.

The evening was a balm to them all, and laughter and high spirits rang out throughout the manor. However, as all good things must end, their time that evening came to a close when the Headmaster collected them for the return to Hogwarts. After saying their good byes, they returned to the school via the Floo. It had been a good day—one of the best, in Harry's opinion.



At Hogwarts, Ron Weasley was not in as festive a mood as his friends were at the ambassador's manor.

If Ron were to be honest with himself, what he was feeling at that particular moment was petulance. Hermione, the girl he had been dreaming about for most of the previous year, and had finally gathered the courage to ask out, had rejected him out of hand. Sure his ego was bruised, but even more, he felt heartsick. Why did she not like him back?

Hermione had denied it, but Ron was not so blind that he did not see more of her feelings than she thought. And what Ron was certain he saw, was that Hermione still harbored feelings for Harry. He was sure of it, and the fact of the matter was that he was more than a little jealous of his best friend. Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived, defeater of Voldemort and all around famous bloke had the affections of the one girl Ron Weasley wanted to like him. It was all so unfair, especially since Harry could not do anything about it, being betrothed to Fleur Delacour.

A small part of Ron's mind niggled at him, telling him that that was not precisely true. Harry was able to have more than one wife, after all, and though Hermione was a Muggleborn, and therefore needed to tread carefully in the matter, he would not be surprised if her love for Harry was enough to help her overcome her socially induced distaste for a multiple marriage enough to agree to become a second wife.

How did Harry get all the luck anyway? A beautiful bird like Fleur already sewn up and a wonderful girl like Hermione infatuated with him.

But even as Ron's jealousy spiked he felt ashamed of himself. Harry was not the kind of guy to lord what he had over everyone else—in fact, he was quite the opposite. He never wanted his fame; it had been thrust upon him. And if Hermione was truly in love with Harry, then Harry was a guy who truly deserved a girl like her, much as it pained Ron to admit it.

The more he thought about it, the more Ron was convinced that there was nothing he could do about the situation. To make a big fuss over Hermione's rejection not only meant risking her friendship, but risking Harry's as well. He was certain Harry would not tolerate

anyone hurting Hermione, best friend or no. And the last thing Ron wanted was a repeat of last year...

And who knew? Maybe Hermione was only infatuated with Harry. Maybe she would grow out of it. She was still only sixteen, after all; how many people actually found a true love at such a tender age?

The thought rang hollow for Ron the instant it entered his mind. Hermione was very mature and well beyond her years in many ways, not the least of which was her intelligence and her emotional maturity. Though her feelings still may turn out to be nothing more than teenage infatuation, Ron felt it was something more—it had always been something more. They had been a trio since that Halloween night during first year, but in truth, Ron had always known subconsciously that he orbited around the two of them, rather than the three orbiting around each other. It had always been Harry and Hermione, and it likely would have only been Harry and Hermione, had the betrothal contract with Fleur not interfered.

No, the sooner he accepted the reality of the situation, the better, as it would allow him to get things back to normal. Having come to the decision, Ron was rather proud of his own emotional maturity—it was certainly better than he had behaved the previous year.

Besides, Hermione's last words to him about their suitability for each other still echoed in his head. Was she correct? It was something he would have to think about in greater detail when the time came, but for now her rejection was still a little too raw. There would be time enough for that later.

Thoughts of the events of the previous year once more put Ron into a pensive mood. Hermione was right—though Harry had immediately forgiven him, they had never actually discussed what had happened, and he could now see it had affected their relationship. And though he knew it would be uncomfortable, he knew he had to speak with Harry about it and apologize for his behavior. Nothing else would do.

Having come to a determination, Ron felt lighter than he had in months. He would wait until the appropriate time, but he would have a conversation with Harry. Harry deserved it as his closest friend.

Taking note once again of his surroundings, Ron noted that the common room appeared pretty empty. The hour was getting late and though he had thought to wait up for Harry's return, he now felt that maybe he had better head to bed. He would once again rejoin the group tomorrow.

He was about to push himself up from the sofa, when Fred and George sat down on either side of him, their faces lit up with their usual trademark grins. Ron peered suspiciously back and forth at the two jokesters—usually when they acted in this manner, they had something up their sleeves which would inevitably turn out to be embarrassing, and sometimes painful.

"Good evening, Ron," said one.

"How are you this fine evening?" said the other.

Ron glared at his brothers. "What do you want?"

"Hey, is that any way to speak to your favorite brothers?"

"It's almost as though he doesn't trust us, Forge."

"Hmm... Where do you think he came by that attitude?"

"Please, I was just about to go to bed," Ron complained, knowing that if he allowed it, they could keep up their banter almost indefinitely.

"Far be it for us to deny you your beauty sleep, Ronnie. But you've appeared to be a little down and distant the past couple of days."

"We thought we'd see if there was anything we could do to help."

"I'm fine," Ron answered gruffly. "Nothing wrong with me that a little sleep won't cure."

Unfortunately, the two pranksters did not take the hint.

"I would have thought you'd be on top of the world, Ron," said Gred, going by the fact that he had already called the other Forge. In truth, it generally did not matter which twin was which, as they generally

answered to each other's names, and almost seemed to know what the other was thinking.

"Why?"

"Well, you've been using the book we gave you, right?" replied Forge. "By now you should have the delectable Miss Granger eating out of the palm of your hand."

Ron snorted with derision. "Yeah, well your stupid book didn't work."

Gred's eyes widened at the admission. "You already asked her out?"

"Yeah, and she turned me down flat," Ron grumped, still upset at the turn of events.

The twins shared a glance, and began smirking at one another, instantly putting Ron on his guard. If they had tricked him with that book...

"Hey, what's going on? Why are you two grinning like that?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Nope, nothing at all."

"Yeah, and I'm Merlin. Come on, guys, spill."

Once again the twins glanced at each other in that uncanny manner which suggested they were sharing a conversation without words. By now Ron was beginning to become a little cross, but the twins appeared to notice it and attempted to placate him.

"We really have to hand it to you, Ron," said Gred with a smirk. "We didn't really think you had it in you."

"We thought you'd dillydally about for months before finally getting the courage to ask her out. You really surprised us."

"Didn't see the point in waiting around," Ron said with a shrug.

"No, I suppose not. In true Gryffindor fashion you charged ahead, regardless of the fact that you had virtually no chance whatsoever."

"You almost remind us of your favorite team, the Cannons. They do the same thing—charging out to certain defeat game after game. True Gryffindors, the whole lot of them, though perhaps not the brightest specimens of our house."

"I suspect that they may have a little too much Hufflepuff in them too."

"Not to mention a complete lack of anything resembling skill. But that's probably a prerequisite for admission to the Canon fraternity."

The first twin nodded sagely at his counterpart's words, but for once Ron ignored the insult against his favorite team.

"Wh... What to you mean no chance?" he managed to stammer.

Forge peered at him like he had the intelligence of a particularly stupid flobberworm. "You didn't really think you had a chance with Hermione, did you?"

Ron sputtered with indignation. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you are so different from each other," Gred interjected. "You fight, argue and complain about each other—there's no way a relationship between you two would last. Hermione would be hexing you before you ever got around to saying your vows."

With narrowed eyes, Ron glared at his brothers. "If you thought I didn't have a chance, why did you give me that stupid book? Did you want me to embarrass myself?"

"I'm positively wounded that you would think that of us, Ronnie," declared Gred with a hand placed theatrically over his heart.

"What have we ever done to cause you to think such a thing?" said Forge.

When Ron glared at them even further, they sighed almost as one.

"Well, I guess we have kind of made you suspect our intentions in the past."

"But we assure you we did not do it to embarrass you this time."

"Then why did you do it?"

"To give you the courage to get it out of your system," said Gred. "Otherwise you may have moped around with your puppy dog eyes, and your longing looks for months and months before finally mustering the courage to be shot down."

"This way, we've helped you gain some confidence, and helped you get this painful episode out of the way much sooner than you would have otherwise."

"Not to mention the fact that the book has given you an idea of how to act around girls which you can use the next time."

"Though we would recommend you learn to behave that way naturally, rather than just to impress the girls."

"Seems to me you owe us thanks for our assistance."

Ron did not know whether to be outraged, or to laugh uproariously at their irreverent behavior. They had set him up, giving him the book and giving him hope, all the while expecting him to fail. He wanted to be angry—desperately wanted to let loose on them—but somehow, found that he could not find the will within him to do so. There was never a dull moment when the twins were around and Ron reflected that he should have been suspicious at their apparent largesse. Desperation, it seemed, had made him careless.

"I think the next time I see you, I'll give that book back to you—right between the eyes, if I can manage it."

"In that case, aim for Fred—it was his idea," said Forge.

"Hey, I distinctly remember it being your idea, George!" said Gred.

Ron, however, just shooed them away. "All right then. You two have had your fun. Now off with you!"

"Very well," they said, standing. "We had better go and collect our winnings now."

They turned to walk away, but had only made it a couple of steps before Ron's mouth caught up with his brain. "Winnings?"

"Yes. Some of our housemates had the stupidity to bet us that Hermione would get together with you."

"Knowing you both better, we took that bet, and are about to make a tidy profit."

Flashing identical grins, the twins turned and sauntered away, supposedly to collect their aforementioned winnings.

Ron was once again left in the unenviable position of not knowing whether to laugh or cry. In the end though, he did neither—he was too weary and wished the day to end too much for that.

He rose from the sofa and trudged up the stairs, swearing once again to never accept anything from the twins, be it their assistance, or any other of their double-edged gifts. The results of their assistance were almost guaranteed to be immensely devastating to his pride.

## Chapter 16 – Weasley Troubles

The days after the trial of Sirius Black were good ones for Harry Potter and his group. Though perhaps he was essentially the same person as he had always been, others were heard to comment on the fact that Harry seemed to have an extra spring in his step, not to mention the smile which was always hovering, ready to appear on his face at a moment's notice. Not even the presence and the watchful disdain of the resident Defense Against the Dark Arts professor was able to bring him down from his high.

The next morning's Daily Prophet headline, hailing the trial and subsequent acquittal of the head of the family Black—and last to bear the name—induced as large a grin as any of his friends had ever seen, though perhaps the acclamation was not universal. To most of the rest of the student body, it was supposed, it was a matter of relatively little consequence, though Draco Malfoy's disgust was evident. He had been in line to become the head of the House of Black, had Sirius been convicted and executed, and his displeasure that the heir to the Black Estate was alive and well, and innocent of all charges, turned his mood as bad as Harry's was good.

For the forces of the light, Sirius's exoneration was important, though possible only through a certain set of curious circumstances. When Sirius had run away as a young man, his mother had promptly disowned him from the family, blasting him from the family tapestry in her disgust and rage. However, his father had never made the banishment official, and as head of house, only he had the power to do so. Whether this was because Orion disagreed with his wife in this matter or because he had decided that having a blood traitor as an heir was better than one of the cadet lines inheriting, Sirius never knew. Suffice to say that upon his escape from Azkaban, Sirius was astonished to find that he was still a member of the family, and more importantly, its head. One would perhaps think that his time in Azkaban would have negated his rights as head of house, but as Sirius had never actually been convicted of a crime, and had never been banished by his father, the magic which governed such issues had always recognized him as the official head of house once his father and brother had passed away, regardless of the perceptions of society at large.

A more important consideration was the fact that his exoneration kept the Black fortune—which, despite centuries of decline, was still



sizable—out of the hands of Voldemort's forces, and specifically, from Draco Malfoy. Privately, Sirius informed Harry that he had already completed the paperwork to make Harry his heir, so Draco would never have inherited in any case. However, as his will could have been challenged on a number of fronts, being free and recognized as the head of his house was the best outcome for all. Of course, Harry's position as heir was pending upon Sirius never having a child—a son would inherit if Sirius was ever fortunate enough to have one.

Sirius's exoneration also allowed him to assume his family's hereditary seat in the Wizengamot, and to hold the proxy vote for house Potter. In the past, though the Potter vote had always been cast by those aligned with the light, the Black vote had been held by those who had held similar beliefs to those espoused by Orion Black, and though one might scoff at the effect of having one vote defect to an opposing stance, the power and influence of a new and secure Black head was not to be underestimated, especially when that vote had been traditionally dark.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, as the new head of Black, Sirius was able to run the politics of his house, and to specifically determine the status of any present members of his house. Bellatrix LeStrange and Narcissa Malfoy, in particular, would find themselves under close scrutiny, as Sirius had instructed the goblins to investigate the marriage contracts under which the two women had been married. If there had been any breach of contract, Sirius was well within his rights to declare the contracts null and void, and demand any bride prices attached to the contracts returned. This would not affect their marriages, as such—regardless of whether the contracts had actually been breached, the marriages had taken place—but at the very least it could deprive Voldemort's forces of some of their liquid assets. Since the family's history was dark, Sirius was uncertain as to whether the goblins would actually find anything, but he felt it was a reasonable move to make in light of the potential benefits

The reactions of rest of the school to Sirius's exoneration were in general expected. Most of the students were indifferent as, though the older years remembered the stories of Sirius Black and his actions during Harry's third year, he was still largely an unknown quantity. The Headmaster was openly relieved at the outcome, and the teachers who had known Sirius were happy that he had finally

received the justice he deserved, especially Minerva McGonagall, who had always had a soft spot in her heart for Sirius and his fellow Marauders. As for Severus Snape—whose rivalry with James Potter and Sirius Black had been legendary—he gave the report one of his trademark sneers, and then proceeded to ignore its very existence.

The most curious, perhaps, was Dolores Umbridge. The woman had said absolutely nothing during Sirius's trial, though Harry would have expected her to be vocal in condemning him. Her silence seemed to indicate that Fudge had deemed the situation a lost cause and had ordered her to keep her peace, for Harry doubted privately that the woman was intelligent enough to come to such a determination on her own. But once the report was circulated amongst the Hogwarts population, Dolores was even more obvious in her attention toward Harry Potter. On several occasions, Harry could almost have sworn that the professor was attempting to bore holes through him with her eyes, though why the freedom of Sirius Black should make her even more disposed to hate him than before, he had no idea whatsoever.

Whatever the woman's plans had been when she entered the school, she had not progressed very far on them. Thus far, other than the contrived attempt to assign him detention on the day of the trial, things had been fairly calm in her class, and it was now widely acknowledged to be almost as boring as History. And other than the one Educational Decree which was a concern, the rest of them—including two more which had appeared since the first ones had been posted—were almost nonsensical, not to mention completely useless to what they suspected was her cause. If she was trying to infiltrate the school and force changes due to the supposed uncontrolled nature of the students, she was sadly failing. Thus far, she had had relatively little about which to complain, especially if she was attempting to prove the Hogwarts was out of control, and the Headmaster out of touch.

Life at the school continued apace. Classes were attended, homework assigned and completed—or ignored, as the case may be—and Harry found himself becoming even closer to his two female friends than he had been before, if that was even possible. His closeness to Hermione was a given—they had been by each other's side since they had arrived at Hogwarts, after all. However, now that Fleur had become part of the dynamic, and Hermione and Fleur had drawn so close, Ron's distance from the entire group for several days caused a gentle shift in their friendships. It now

seemed that Harry, Fleur, and Hermione had almost become the new de facto golden trio as, other than for classes, they could almost always be seen in one another's company. And though Ron was able to see this as well as any other, he was quick to realize that to a certain extent it was his own fault due to his actions the previous year. His distance from Hermione in particular, which, despite his determination to accept the situation, persisted for several days, further cementing the new trio's status.

The one thing in which there appeared to be little change was the status of Harry's relationship with Fleur, or at least it would have to a casual observer. In truth, they were becoming closer and more comfortable with each other all the time. At this point that had not translated into a more physical sort of affection, but they were both determined that that particular facet of their relationship did not need to be rushed. It was not like they did not have time for that in the future.

There were two things specifically of note during those few days. The first was that Malfoy was making much less of a pain of himself, particularly in potions class, but overall as well. He had not taken Snape's set down well, and Dean had gleefully reported seeing the ponce storming down to the owlery soon after the incident in potions with a letter in his hand, presumably to whine to the senior ponce about his mistreatment in Snape's class. Whether there was ever any response was not known, but the fact that Malfoy was much less obtrusive was undeniable.

The other matter of some note was the furthering idea of a defense club to help offset the uselessness of Umbridge's class. Fleur and Hermione had discussed Luna's suggestion at length, and both of them agreed that it was exactly what they needed to help pass their year-end tests. Furthermore, Fleur agreed with Hermione's idea of having Harry lead the group. Not only was he the best at defense, Fleur had pointed out, but running a club such as this was also a good way to further improved Harry's confidence in himself. The problem was inducing Harry to agree with their way of thinking.

Harry was stubborn—Hermione knew this from years of friendship, and Fleur had seen it several times, even in the short time of their betrothal. And though Harry had no problem helping others—and actually possessed a healthy dose of what Hermione coined as his "saving people thing"—in this instance he did not feel that he was up

to the task of running a club on top of his other activities. Why this was so, the two young women could not precisely say. It may have been a consequence of his new determination to excel at his school work, or it may have been simply because he still lacked confidence. Whatever the case may be, he was digging in his heels, and no matter how many times they discussed it, he would deflect any discussion of leading it himself, though he would certainly add his own opinions to exactly how it would be structured, what should be taught, or anything else of any merit.

Hermione and Fleur were not about to give up, though—Harry was the perfect person to lead it, whether he knew it or not, and they were determined to help him see that fact.

Monday morning found the trio in the Great Hall with their other friends, all concentrating on their breakfast. As it was a Monday, none of them were precisely energetic—Mondays had a tendency to have that effect on a person. The conversation was sporadic and desultory, and the entire hall was rather quiet. This quiet and contemplative mood was interrupted when dozens of owls swooped into the Great Hall to deliver the morning mail.

Fleur was watching the spectacle in a rather bored fashion—she had exchanged letters with her parents late last week and was not expecting anything—when she noticed a slow and somewhat clumsy owl gliding unsteadily down through the throngs of the other post owls. The clumsy creature was aiming directly—or as close as it could—for their spot along the table.

It hit the table several seats down and spun out of control, knocking over several glasses of pumpkin juice and upsetting a plate of bacon, before it stopped a short distance down the table from where Fleur sat with Harry and Hermione. The creature then picked itself up with whatever dignity it still possessed and shuffled toward them, stopping directly in front of Hermione. From further down the table Fleur heard a gasp.

"Isn't that Errol?" she heard Ginny Weasley ask.

By now the attention of the entire in the area was fixed upon the owl, or perhaps more correctly, on the angry red envelope the owl was even now offering to Hermione.

Hermione gingerly reached out and accepted the red envelope, after which the owl—showing that although it was clumsy and old, it was decidedly not stupid—awkwardly flapped its wings and began hightailing it from the hall, inasmuch as it was physically capable.

Fleur gazed at her friend with some trepidation—it was clear that Hermione had most certainly not expected a letter, let alone a howler, and especially not one which was carried by an owl the Weasley family all seemed to recognize. A quick glance at Harry showed his surprise, though Fleur did notice an undercurrent of suspicion and a hint of anger beginning to color his features.

With a shaky hand, Hermione ran her thumb through the flap of the envelope, which was beginning to smolder, and very tentatively, she pulled letter out of the envelope, immediately snatching her hand away when confetti exploded from the howler, and it began to scream.

"HERMIONE GRANGER! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING, YOUNG LADY? I SIMPLY COULD NOT BELIEVE IT WHEN I HEARD THAT A YOUNG GIRL LIKE YOU WOULD REJECT MY SON! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE ANYWAY? ARE YOU THAT MUCH OF A GOLD-DIGGER THAT YOU WOULD REJECT RONNIE AND SET YOUR SIGHTS ON A YOUNG MAN WHO IS ALREADY TAKEN? I AM UTTERLY ASHAMED OF YOU, YOUNG LADY, AFTER ALL RONNIE HAS DONE FOR YOU, BEING YOUR FRIEND ALL THESE YEARS, AND STANDING BEHIND YOU AND SUPPORTING YOU, THIS IS THE WAY YOU TREAT HIM? IF THIS IS THE WAY YOU ARE GOING TO ACT, YOU ARE NO LONGER WELCOME IN MY HOME UNTIL YOU COME TO YOUR SENSES! YOU ARE A DISGRACE!

With that final accusation, the howler burst into flame and was consumed, leaving a stunned Hermione with tears already leaking from the corners of her eyes. Without a word to anyone, she stood and fled the hall to the already growing chorus of jeers from the Slytherin table.

Fleur glanced at Harry and, seeing him begin to rise, she put her hand on his arm to restrain him.

"I'll go find her," she told him.

Harry appeared as though he wanted to protest, but after a moment he gave her a tight nod. As Fleur rose to go, she cast a glance at the assembled Weasleys and was unsurprised to see them all sporting the same looks of astonished befuddlement, though she thought Ron also had a hint of embarrassment and even guilt in his visage.

Shaking her head, Fleur grabbed both her and Hermione's packs, and made for the door. She exited to the entrance hall to find that Harry had followed her. In his hands was the map his father and friends had made, which he was studying intently.

"She's in an unused classroom on the first floor," he bit out through clenched teeth.

Looking over his shoulder, Fleur noted the location on the map, while inwardly thinking about Harry's protectiveness towards Hermione. How her betrothed could not be fully aware of his feelings for the young witch was beyond Fleur's comprehension. However, that was a subject for later thought—for now, her friend needed her.

"I'll comfort her," said Fleur.

Harry smiled at her and reached out to squeeze her hand, and kiss her cheek. "Thanks Fleur. I'll join you as soon as I figure out what's going on."

Nodding, Fleur slung the two backpacks over her shoulder and set out, noting Harry's determined gait as he returned to the Great Hall. Clearly, certain students were about to be called to account for the events of the morning.

Ron watched as Harry and Fleur followed Hermione from the hallway, his mind spinning at what had just happened. When he had written his mother, it had been in order to release some of his frustration and ease the pressure he felt on his heart. It was widely known exactly how Molly Weasley doted on her children, and for Ron her mothering normally caused him no end of annoyance, as she could be positively smothering at times. However, she also had a way of listening to her children and supporting them regardless of the situation, which at times—like this, he had thought—was immensely comforting. Attacking his friend, however, was not exactly the type of comfort Ron had in mind.

"Ron!" Ginny hissed. "What did you tell Mum?"

"I sure didn't tell her to send Hermione a howler!" Ron whispered back in his own defense."

"Our siblings appear to be up to something, George."

Ron turned and saw the twins regarding both himself and Ginny with looks of suspicion etched upon their faces.

"They do, Fred, and if I'm not mistaken, it has something to do with the lovely Miss Granger, who has just run from the room in tears."

For once, the twins appeared to be completely serious—no hint of their usual playfulness and sense of fun was evident in the suspicious glares they were directing at their two youngest siblings. And if that was not unnerving, the other members of their group—Neville and Luna (who almost always sat at the Gryffindor table recently), not to mention the Gryffindor team members—all had frowns upon their faces as they regarded the two youngest Weasleys.

"Well, Ronnie? Ginny? What is going on here?"

Ron glanced around with some apprehension, noticing the sea of eyes fixed on their little conference. "Umm... Fred, George, can we have this discussion elsewhere?"

The twins exchanged a look and a glance around the hall where, it appeared, an undue amount of attention was fixed upon their little conference. "I suppose that makes sense," replied George at length.

"No sense in airing our family's dirty laundry in a room full of gossiping teenagers," Fred agreed.

The four stood and made their way from the table, Ron assiduously avoiding Malfoy's smirk—and perversely wishing he could knock it off the poncy git's face. He followed his brothers and sister from the Great Hall where they were confronted by an extremely angry-looking Harry.

"Give us five minutes, then come and find us," said George, preempting whatever Harry was about to say.

"We want to talk to our brother and sister first," added Fred.

Harry eyed them with no lessening of his anger, before nodding and entering the Great Hall. Meanwhile Ron and his sister followed the twins to an unoccupied anteroom, where the two pranksters immediately turned on their siblings.

"Well you two? What's going on here?"

"Don't look at me," cried Ginny defensively. "Ron's the letter king, not me!"

George's responding glare seemed to indicate he thought Ginny had all the intelligence of a mountain troll. "Are you not our sister?" he asked rhetorically.

"And more to the point," Fred continued, "aren't you the one who has mooned about, making puppy dog eyes at Harry ever since he became friends with Ron? Come on, Ginny, if you have anything to do with this, tell us so we can save our friendship with Harry."

"I had nothing to do with it," Ginny insisted. "Yes, I like Harry, but I've not said one thing to Mum about Harry or Hermione since we came to school."

"And have you given up on Harry yet?" prompted George.

"No!" was her decisive reply. "Why should I? You both know as well as I that he is able to have more than one wife. I'm not going to give up when there's still hope."

"Ginny, you don't have a chance!" said Fred bluntly. "He's engaged to Fleur, and unless I miss my guess, if anyone has the inside track on becoming the second Mrs. Potter, that person most certainly appears to be Hermione."

"But Harry said he wasn't interested in Hermione!" Ron exclaimed.

"Ron, you really are a thick git," said Fred with some disgust. "He may think he has no intentions toward her, but even you, the perpetually blind, has seen that the world revolves around her in his



eyes. Isn't that why you actually developed a backbone and went after her yourself?"

"Harry's getting more comfortable with Fleur all the time," George added. "But it's always been Hermione."

"Be quiet for a moment—we'll deal with you after we deal with our younger sister."

Through all of this, Ginny gaped at her brothers. "Hermione is interested in Harry? She told me she wasn't!"

Fred shook his head with some disgust. "It appears like Ron is not the only one who can't see two feet in front of his face. It's like the blind leading the blind!"

"We've got our youngest sister who watches Harry like a hawk and practically undresses him with her eyes," George said, ticking one finger, "and she can't even see how into each other Harry and Hermione are."

"Then we've got Harry and Hermione themselves who can't see how into each other they are," continued Fred, ticking another finger.

"The surprising part is that our resident thicko here," George jerked a thumb at Ron, "has taken his head out of his arse and noticed enough to try to make a move on Hermione before Harry stakes his claim. And even then he believes Harrikins when he says he's not into Hermione."

Ron bristled at the insult but remained silent.

"And George is right, Ginny," said Fred. "I would have expected you to see how important Hermione is to Harry a long time ago, given how much attention you pay to him."

"Look, Ginny, we know you've always had a crush on Harry, but you need to let it go. Even if he does take another wife, there is no guarantee he will choose you."

"I know," said Ginny. "I've already had this conversation with Hermione. She told me to just be Harry's friend, and that's what I'm trying to do."

"Well, that's certainly an improvement on your 'squeak and run' tactics from before," was Fred's dry response.

Ginny's gaze darkened, but George spoke before she could go off on his twin. "You aren't going to be all angry at Hermione now because you know this, are you?"

"Of course not!" Ginny snapped. Her stance and stony expression screamed her defiance. "But I won't give up hope. I won't complain to Mum, or bother Harry, but I'm going to try to get to know him better. Hopefully, he'll come to love me as much as I love him."

There was a moment's silence after Ginny's statement, and though Ron did not say anything, he knew that whatever feelings Ginny had for Harry, they must be deeper than the infatuation he felt for Hermione. A small niggling part of him still thought Ginny was not seeing or even attracted to the real Harry, but he was not about to get in her way. She had to make her own decisions; he was having difficulty enough dealing with his own.

"Ginny, I'd advise you to give it up, but it's your choice."

"As long as you don't go antagonizing our friends, that is."

Ginny nodded, and though there were tears in her eyes, her expression held a determined and almost implacable obstinacy. It was clear that regardless of what the brothers said to her, she was not ready to give up.

Therefore, Ron soon found himself directly in the crosshairs of his older brothers once again. "Well, Ron? Do you want to tell us something?"

Ron shuffled his feet awkwardly, not really wanting to talk about it. The twins already had far too much blackmail knowledge about his feelings for Hermione, and he was reluctant to discuss it further. He tried mumbling a response, hoping that it would mollify them, but the twins were having nothing of it.

"I'm sorry, Ron, I can't hear you. Perhaps you should speak up."

"All right, all right!" Ron exclaimed. "I wrote to Mum and told her that I asked Hermione out and that she had said no."

"And..." Fred prompted.

"And nothing," said Ron. "That's all I told her. I was hoping she'd help me feel better—you guys know how supportive she can be. I certainly can't expect that from you gits now, can I?"

"So you didn't complain to Mum and ask her to stick up for you against big bad Hermione?"

Ron glared at Fred. "No. I figured she'd write me back, not attack Hermione.

"Look, guys," Ron continued, "I was hurt when Hermione wouldn't go out with me—I won't deny that. But I respect her decision and I'd never want Mum to embarrass her in front of the whole school."

At that moment the door opened and Harry walked in, a grim expression on his face. Ron had to do a double take—he had never seen Harry so focused, and rarely had he seen his best friend looking so upset. It appeared the confidence he had obtained from the influence of the Delacours was being unleashed, and a new Harry, complete with the leadership skills and the implacable will to achieve his goals—not to mention his will to protect his friends—was emerging. Ron found himself feeling a little intimidated.

Stepping into the room, Harry surveyed his friends and wondered just exactly what was going on. The howler he had just heard insulting his closest friend reminded him of the crap Hermione had had to put up with the previous year. She would not have to do the same this year—not if Harry had anything to say about it.

What he was not certain of, was Ron's role in this fiasco. He knew that Ron was upset by Hermione's rejection—his behavior during that past few days had made that plain for anyone who knew him to see. Ron was... difficult sometimes. He could be petulant and jealous without a doubt, and his past had shown him to have a certain vindictive streak as well. Harry thought he would not behave in such a vindictive manner simply because Hermione had refused to go out with him, but he was not completely certain. If Ron had

caused Hermione's embarrassment, it would be some time before Harry was able to forgive him.

"Well, what's going on guys?" Harry asked without preamble.

The Weasley children all shuffled from side to side, and none of them would meet his eyes. Harry folded his arms and leaned back against the door frame, waiting for one of them to speak up.

"Maybe you should tell him, Ron," one of the twins said.

Ron scowled, but he visibly gathered himself, and turned to face Harry.

"I asked Hermione out, but she told me no."

Becoming a little impatient, Harry gave Ron the hurry up motion with his hand. "And?"

"Well, apparently Mum didn't take it very well."

"Ron, what exactly did you tell your mother?" Harry asked.

"Just that Hermione told me she wouldn't go out with me and that I wasn't happy with it, I swear. I'm not happy about it, you know that, Harry. But I didn't expect Mum to do this. I'd never want Mum to go after Hermione like that. Hermione is my friend."

It was more than likely nothing more than the truth, thought Harry. Ron was not a very good liar—Harry figured he could usually spot when Ron was trying to cover something up. The thing Harry was not certain of was why Mrs. Weasley would react this way. He was well aware of the fact that she wanted him for a son-in-law, but was she really that set on having Hermione as a daughter as well?

No, it was likely not that, exactly. It was more likely that she was being protective of her son, though a certain amount of resentment for the way Harry had suddenly been tied to Fleur had likely bled over into the situation.

"So, what do we do now?" queried Harry.

His friends all looked at one another as though they had not considered what they should do to fix the problem.

"I guess we need to speak with Mum," said one of the twins.

"Not that I'm looking forward to that," grumbled the other.

"Come on now, Fred, where's your sense of adventure?"

"My sense of adventure is completely subservient to my sense of preservation," was Fred's response. "Especially where Mum is concerned."

Harry smirked—leave it to the twins to take a tense situation and release a little of the stress with just a few words.

"Don't worry, Harry," Ron assured him. "We'll talk to Mum and get her all sorted out."

"Thanks, guys," Harry responded. But while he appreciated their willingness to tackle the problem, he wanted to make certain his friends understood his opinion on the matter.

"I just want you all to know that I consider you family—you've all been very good to me, and I really do appreciate it. And I include your mother in that statement—she's always made me feel welcome at the Burrow, and she and your father have always been there for me when I needed to feel like I had a family.

"But," Harry emphasized, "I will not continue to consider her a part of my family if she continues to attack my friends. She can be angry with Hermione for not going out with you, Ron—that is her choice. But I would appreciate it if she would not react in such a public manner. I will not allow her to continue to embarrass my friend in front of the entire school. After she believed the articles about Hermione last year, I set her straight—I would have thought she would know Hermione better by now."

"We know, Harry," George responded.

Harry looked at them curiously. "Is part of this related to her disappointment over my betrothal to Fleur?"

The siblings all looked at one another yet again, giving Harry all the answer he felt he needed. It was confirmed by Fred, however. "We're not sure, but it may be."

Shaking his head, Harry fixed them all with a stern glare. "Well, your Mum can't do anything about that. And besides, it's not Hermione's fault, so she I'd appreciate it if your Mum didn't attack her."

He glanced at Ginny and smiled, which she returned somewhat hesitantly. Ginny was behaving a little more familiarly around him, rather than the almost silent shyness he had always seen from her in the past. He liked the change in her—it was much better having another friend, rather than someone who would not even speak when he entered a room.

"Look guys," Harry stressed, "I can handle your Mum's disappointment over what has happened. But she has to get used to it because she cannot change it. I really don't want to have to break ties with the first mother figure I've ever had."

The message he had just imparted did not seem to have escaped any of his friends—Molly Weasley had been the first woman he had ever met who had any of the criteria he would expect in a mother. Petunia Dursley certainly could not be accused of being motherly—not even to her own son, regardless of her sickening displays. However, Harry now had another woman who he looked up to, and to be completely blunt, Appoline Delacour was far less overbearing and nosy than Molly Weasley. Appoline would eventually become his mother-in-law, and her personality made her much easier to approach than the Weasley matron. Harry still liked and appreciated Molly, but he would not continue to associate with her if she persisted in her attacks.

The redhead siblings readily agreed with his sentiments, and after a few more moments of discussion, Harry exited the room, consulting the map as he left. He had a hurting friend to find and comfort.

For the rest of the day, Harry, Hermione, and Fleur were a little cold to all the Weasley siblings, though in truth Hermione did not hold a grudge against her friends—they could not control the actions of their mother, after all. That did not change the hurt she felt, nor what her friends felt on her behalf. She was able to be gracious when, one by one, the Weasley children approached her to apologize for

their mother's behavior. But even so, she could not help but be aloof from them, regardless of their best efforts—the humiliation she felt from receiving such an accusing howler was still too acute for her to forget it so easily.

The one who held back, though, and watched them from a distance was Ron. She knew Ron would not have maliciously encouraged his mother to attack her—Harry's account of his conversation with the Weasley siblings forced her to agree with that assessment, not that she would have thought him capable of it anyway. Still, it was disappointing and hurtful that Ron's mother would have thought she was capable of such shrewish behavior, and she was not eager to see the woman again any time soon. And given the distance between her and Ron—the distance Ron had already created due to his own disappointment—Hermione was not exactly surprised when Ron did not approach her during the day like his siblings had. Perhaps Ron was making some progress, but in Hermione's eyes he was still had some growing to do.

The one thing which struck Hermione that day was Harry's attitude and actions. In short, Harry positively doted on Hermione throughout that entire day. He was gentle and caring, and very solicitous for her feelings, and Hermione found herself enjoying the attention. And she knew that Fleur had not missed it at all—in fact, the French witch had smirked at Harry's behavior any time she thought the two of them were not looking, though Hermione did catch her at it a couple of times. And when Hermione confronted Fleur about it, the Veela simply smiled and asked if she still doubted the depth of Harry's feelings for her.

After classes were finished—and Monday was their heaviest day of classes—a very relieved Hermione dropped her books off in her dorm, happy that she was finally done for the day. She had been the subject of attention from all quarters that day, and though no one had actually said anything to her—even Malfoy had been cowed to a certain extent by Harry's glares, she thought—still it had been a trying day, and one she was happy was over. Now all she had to do was make it through dinner, and she could relax with her friends and work on her homework.

She made her way down to the common room, and was surprised to see Ron pacing the floor not ten feet from the foot of the stairs. She paused for a moment, and then resolutely stepped into the room,

causing Ron to stop his pacing and look at her with a certain measure of nervousness.

"Umm... Hermione, can I talk to you for a moment?" Ron stammered.

"Of course, Ronald. What can I do for you?"

She noticed Ron's slight flinch at the moniker "Ronald"—he knew as well as anyone that she only called him that when he was in trouble—before he glanced about the room and motioned her to a nearby corner which was unoccupied. Once they had moved there, he sighed and ran his hand through his hair in agitation, before he turned to face her with determination.

"Hermione, I wanted to apologize for my mother."

"Thank you, Ron, but I'm certain it wasn't your fault," Hermione replied. "Right?"

Though perhaps she should have had more faith in her friend, a part of Hermione still could not help but wonder if Ron had had something to do with his mother's actions. His own actions the previous year toward Harry, not to mention what he had done over the broom incident in third year, made her hesitant.

"I did write my mother a letter, but I was disappointed, you know? I do like you and I did want to go out with you, and I told my mother that. I do have feelings for you, Hermione, but I respect your feelings as well, and would never want to see you hurt and embarrassed the way you were this morning."

"Thank you, Ron," Hermione said, patting his hand. "Thanks for saying this—I know it wasn't easy. However, I don't hold you responsible for your mother's actions."

A relieved smile stole over Ron's face, and he pulled Hermione into an enthusiastic, but clumsy hug. This was more like the Ron she knew—uncomfortable speaking of his feelings, and awkward in his actions, and more endearing than the Ron attempting to be a suave ladies' man. She was grateful to see his reappearance.



"I also want you to know that I respect your feelings too, Ron," Hermione replied when Ron had finally pulled back. "I don't have the kind of feelings for you that you want, but I'd never hurt you over them either.

"I just really would like you to be a little more constant in your friendships to both Harry and me. I really want to return to the way we used to be when we were younger, before all these feelings and hormones started getting in the way."

"I'm working on it, okay?" said Ron with a cheeky grin.

Hermione could not help but laugh at his antics. He waggled his eyebrows at her and bowed in an exaggerated manner.

"Shall we go to dinner now, milady?" he asked.

Giggling, Hermione grasped his proffered arm and joined their friends who, unnoticed, had gathered behind them, all ready to head out of the portrait hole, and go for dinner.

As they walked toward the hall, Hermione could not help but reflect yet again on the day, and on her close friend. Ron had always been somewhat immature, but if there was a silver lining to his mother's regrettable actions, it seemed as though it was giving him a push to finally grow up a little. It was definitely a start.

Albus had been in the Great Hall that morning when Miss Granger opened her howler. Even so, he was somewhat surprised to receive a visit from the Weasley twins later that afternoon, asking for permission for a rather odd request—they wanted to Floo the Burrow and talk to their mother about the howler.

He had been considering doing something about the situation himself. The pressures on Harry, particularly with Umbridge in the castle spreading her vitriol, were such that Albus did not wish for his favorite student to have even more stress than was already the case. And certainly not from one he had considered family.

Molly Weasley was a good woman, and a staunch supporter of the light, having brought her children up with the same set of beliefs and strong desire to do the right thing as she and Arthur already possessed. For that, he could only be grateful—the Weasley family

was amongst the strongest opponents of Voldemort and his forces, and their assistance and support were invaluable.

But this obsession of Molly's to run her children's lives and her insistence that Ginny would be a perfect match for Harry was not helpful in the slightest. And Albus knew that her frustration over the situation regarding the now enacted marriage contract was behind this, far more than any disappointment she felt over the young Muggleborn rejecting the advances of her youngest son.

Albus had to chuckle—he was not so old that he did not remember his own attempts as a youth. He had been just as awkward and lacking in confidence as any young person, but if he had to guess, he thought young Ronald would have put him to shame, as socially awkward as the lad was known to be at times.

He was quick to accept their request—it was best to resolve the matter in as timely a fashion as possible, after all. And it was far better that the reprimand come from her own family than from him. Albus did not wish to embarrass her, after all.

As Albus was to be briefly absent from the school that Monday evening, he requested the siblings' presence in his office on Tuesday. Once they had all gathered together, he grasped a handful of Floo powder, and called the Burrow. He received the requisite permission and motioned for the children to precede him, stepping through once they had all left. He arrived in the living room of the Burrow, where Molly and Arthur awaited them noting that the Weasley parents' faces were etched with concern—no doubt they suspected that their children had done something to warrant a visit from the Headmaster. How ironic that exactly the opposite was the case.

"Albus, are the children all right?" Molly fretted the moment he had entered the room.

"They are fine, Molly, but they do have something important to discuss with you," responded Albus. "I will stay only to give support, but I will allow the children to tell you the problem."

By this time, the children had greeted their parents with hugs all around, and then made their way to the various pieces of furniture

which was set about the room. Young Ronald was the one to break the ice, and Albus was unsurprised that his words were a trifle blunt.

"Mum, why did you attack Hermione that way?"

Molly appeared taken aback at her son's forthrightness, but it was only a moment before she collected herself.

"Ron, I'll ask you not to speak to me in that manner," she admonished. "I did not attack Miss Granger—I merely tried to point out to her that she was making a mistake."

"Making a mistake?" asked George.

"That's rich, Mum," said Fred. "I thought it was a person's choice who they wanted to date."

When Molly was about to respond, Arthur, with a look of confusion, interjected. "What are you talking about? What happened?"

"I asked Hermione to be my girlfriend, Dad," said Ron with a hint of embarrassment.

Arthur smiled widely. "Good for you, son. She's a wonderful girl."

Ron's expression was stoic. "She refused me, Dad. She told me she doesn't have anything but brotherly feelings for me."

Clearly Arthur did not know what to say. "It's okay—I was a little upset, but I respect her feelings."

"That's good, son," Arthur said with a hint of pride. "We cannot force our feelings on others, no matter how much we want them to be returned. It sounds like you handled it properly."

Arthur glanced at Molly, who was now blushing faintly, clearly suspecting what her children wished to discuss. "Then what is the problem, Ron?"

"Mum sent Hermione a howler," Ginny stated. "She called Hermione a gold-digger and insinuated that she was a tramp trying to go after Harry when he's already taken. She embarrassed Hermione in front of the whole school."

"Oh, Molly," Arthur said with some resignation and a shake of his head.

"It wasn't like that," Molly protested. "The girl doesn't know what is best for her, and I was just trying to help her come to a better decision."

"On the contrary, Molly," Albus spoke up, feeling the need for a little back up for the children's claims, "I was there when Miss Granger received your howler. It was rude, overbearing and completely uncalled for—you should not have sent her that. You are not her mother, after all."

The woman had probably not been set down in this manner since she was a schoolgirl at Hogwarts, Albus reflected. Certainly he had never spoken to her in such a manner since he had gently reprimanded her for some mild misbehavior during her sixth year. Clearly she was not used to it. She said nothing, however, though her nervous glances at everyone in the room made her appear as though she was feeling slightly besieged.

"Mum, I want to know why you are trying to drive away our friends," said Ginny with a cold implacability.

Molly was surprised at Ginny's accusation, but her eyes immediately narrowed. "Ginny, I will not have you speak to me in this manner."

"It's true, Mum," said Ron, supporting his sister. "You know what Harry told us? He told us that he considers us a family, but he won't if you keep attacking Hermione."

Molly threw her hands up in the air with some exasperation. "I was not attacking the girl, and I resent the implication that I was. Ron sent me a letter which clearly told me he was heartbroken, and I was trying to support him by pointing out that Hermione should think about it a little more before she dismissed him out of hand."

"Mum, no one is accusing you of being intentionally hateful," said Fred. "But the letter you sent to Hermione was not a gentle remonstrance."

"Hermione had tears in her eyes as she left the hall, Mum," added George. "She was embarrassed about it, and I don't think I need to tell you how the Slytherins reacted."

"Well... perhaps I may have been a little... forceful in voicing my opinions," said Molly, now having the grace to appear embarrassed.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a little forceful, Mum," said Ron. "But I'd really like to know why you're so set on a match between me and Hermione. I mean, I know you want Ginny and Harry..." Ron trailed off, looking a trifle embarrassed himself.

Albus was interested himself. The fact that Molly wanted Harry and Ginny together was about the worst kept secret in existence, but Albus had never given much thought to the other two members of the trio, and whether Molly had any ambitions in that quarter.

Though she did not answer at once, Molly threw a few surreptitious looks at her youngest son, leading Albus to believe that her reasons revolved around him. When she finally did break her silence, his suspicions were confirmed.

"I... I don't want you to feel badly, Ron, but sometimes you have a tendency to be a little... unmotivated. Hermione is a driven girl, and I think she would be perfect to help you achieve your potential."

"Oh Mum," Ron said with some exasperation. "I know what I'm like sometimes, and I'm trying to get better. To be honest, Harry's new attitude has been a great help, and I think I'm making progress."

"But even I know that that is nothing to base a long-term relationship on. I like Hermione, and I'd love for her to like me back, but if we're really that different, then it's really for the best this way."

"Good job, Ronnie," said George with a slap on his brother's back. "There's some hope for you yet."

Ron backed that statement up when he very maturely crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at his brother, causing laughter around the room. Even Molly appeared to feel somewhat better as the tension eased out of the room. She was not a bad woman, Albus told himself—she was just somewhat of a meddling one, and she sometimes had a tendency to believe that she knew best. Painful as

it was, it was a trait she shared with Albus, if he was completely honest with himself.

Once the laughter died down Arthur spoke up, seemingly deciding it was time for him to take control of the situation. "You have to let it go, Molly. Hermione is a bright and mature girl—she can decide for herself what she wants, and there is nothing you can do to change her mind."

"Very well," said Molly. "I will leave the children alone. I'm not happy with the situation, but it is what it is."

"It is that indeed," said Albus kindly. "I thank you, Molly. I know this is not easy, but it is necessary. We all need to be focused on what is important here, and Harry does not need to be distracted by such matters."

Molly nodded her head in agreement, and then announced that her children needed to get back to school. Once again hugs were exchanged all around, along with the Weasley matriarch imparting some final few pieces of advice for her children, while telling them that she was proud of them. That was where Molly was at her best, Albus reflected—supporting, teaching, and loving her family was where her true qualities lay. Albus had no doubt that Arthur would continue to work with her and help her to find the proper outlet for her frustrations.

As for the children, Albus was very impressed with the maturity they had shown on this evening. The Weasleys had always been staunch supporters of the light, as he had already reflected upon. The young generation was shaping up to be just as important and steadfast as their parents.

A/N: There you have it. That will pretty much be the end of Molly's objections. She's still not happy about the situation, but I have no plans to turn her into a completely hateful bitch.

I also took a bit of a different tack to theme I have often seen in other HP fanfics, that the head of house Black can negate Narcissa and Bellatrix's marriages. It makes sense that if the contracts were breached that they could demand the repayments of the dowries and cast both women from the house, but I've never thought the idea that they could annul the marriages made much sense. There

will be a little more on that to come, though it is not a major plot point by any means.

## Chapter 17 – Compromise

Unfortunately, no one could maintain an emotional high for long, and in the case of one Harry Potter, the likelihood of doing so practically nonexistent. As he had reflected before, his life was not a simple one, nor was it a calm, placid cruise along idle currents. No, his life was more like a trip down a set of raging rapids, or sailing into the teeth of a monster hurricane. Regardless of whether one's life was that of Harry Potter, or of someone more... normal, reality must set in, and the day to day life once more dominate one's focus.

For Harry, it was not one thing which brought him down from his previous high, it was a number of things all put together, and the fall was not a slow decline as might be expected, rather it was a quick and sudden drop.

It started, of course, with the howler from Molly Weasley attacking his best friend. The fact that the Weasley matron had not offered even the barest of apologies did not impress Harry in the slightest, nor did it appease Hermione. The account of her discussion with her children was welcome to the extent that Harry knew she would not repeat her actions in the matter of the howler. However, Harry also knew that she would expect them to simply forget the matter and ignore it, without the proper process of contrition and apology. Doubtless, the next time she saw them she would behave as though everything was as it always was and attempt to smother them in her affection and warm, possessive hugs, as was her wont. She might consider the matter closed, but to Harry and Hermione, as long as the apology was unspoken Molly Weasley would not be properly forgiven.

For several days after the event, Harry found himself responding to the Weasley siblings a little more coldness than he had ever before. In fact, both Hermione and Fleur were the same way. It was not fair, Harry knew, as the children were really not to blame for the actions of their mother, but perhaps it was understandable. Either way, the Weasleys accepted it for what it was, and allowed the trio some time to come to terms with the event by allowing them the space they required. It did not take long, and soon the friends were once again as close as they had ever been.

The one thing which the howler did for Harry was to force him to think about the female adult figures in his life and to put them into



some perspective. He now understood that his initial reaction to Molly Weasley as a mother figure was a simple product of the fact that he had never had such a person in his life before. Aunt Petunia could certainly never be considered as such, and outside of Mrs. Figg—who he considered to be more of a batty old grandmother than anything else—he had not really had any contact with any other adult women, other than Professor McGonagall, who also did not fit the mother mould.

He quickly came to the conclusion that Mrs. Weasley, for all her good points, was not what he considered a mother to be either. At least, she was not what he considered his mother to be. If he had had an image of his mother throughout his formative years, Harry would have said that he had always hoped that she was loving and kind, willing to support him in anything, and overlook his faults as a mother should. Harry was well aware that his image of his mother was skewed, and represented a level of perfection which was not attainable by anyone. And all he had heard from others led him to believe that Lily Evans had been a strong woman, with a stubborn mindset, and a tendency toward somewhat of a volatile temper. However, Harry was certain she would have provided him a loving and positive environment in which to grow, had she lived long enough to do so. Of course, such thoughts engendered a renewed sense of loss, but Harry was well used to it by that time.

So, if Molly Weasley was not a mother figure, what role did she fill in his life? The more Harry thought about it, the more he decided that she filled the role of a meddling aunt, one who was forever poking her nose into the lives of her nieces and nephews, while smothering them with an entirely unnecessary—and perhaps somewhat contrived—level of affection. The description fit Mrs. Weasley precisely, Harry realized, though he knew both the woman, and her children, would likely be offended should he ever characterize her in such a way in front of them.

By contrast, his ideal of a mother was quickly being filled by Appoline Delacour. She was more what he imagined his mother to be—she was firm and unyielding when the situation demanded, but she was also willing to step back and allow her children to live their lives, while providing advice when asked. Harry could not say that he knew her well yet, but he already felt comfortable with her, which was for the best, he reflected, as one day she would be his mother. Or at least she would be his mother-in-law.

Regardless of Harry's thoughts about mother Weasley and the havoc her actions had caused to his equilibrium, it was only a few days before his feelings settled and he was able to put it behind him, though he did not forget. Other more immediate concerns intruded into his consciousness, which replaced the drama with the Weasleys. Malfoy's avoidance turned out to be a rather temporary respite, as after the howler, he returned with a vengeance, though seemingly with a new target. Though he did not exclude Harry from his comments, he now took every opportunity to taunt Hermione, asking her how her campaign to become Harry's mistress was coming, how she was getting along with Mrs. Weasley, and anything else he could think of which would cast her in a negative light. Hermione counseled Harry to ignore the prat, and though Harry would have liked nothing more than to blast Malfoy where it hurt, he agreed that the ferret was not worth his time or effort. It helped that Malfoy did not dare to approach the same level of crudity for which Snape had reprimanded him—it seemed like those words had had a rather large affect on the Malfoy spawn. Or perhaps it was simply the fear of being called out by his head of house again. It turned out to be a good thing that Harry was ignoring him, as they discovered several times that Umbridge had been watching them as Malfoy had been spouting off, no doubt hoping for an opportunity to catch Harry responding to the blond's taunts and begin her task of proving him to be a trouble-maker, which had thus far been stymied by his control over his temper.

The final thing which had begun to dominate Harry's attention was the aforementioned Defense professor and her class. The woman was a menace, he quickly decided, and she seemed intent upon goading Harry into a response, using whatever method she could. Harry, with his new-found maturity—not to mention the ever-present assistance of his closest friend—managed to resist her ever more blatant attempts. It was taxing on his temper, however, as he desperately wanted to put the woman in her place.

More than a month into classes, it was very apparent that their original estimation of her class was spot on—they had learned almost nothing in that time and Harry doubted things would get better as long as she was at Hogwarts. With OWLs looming large at the end of the year, even Harry, who had always found Defense to be easier than most, began to be worried about how he would manage to pass the tests without any practical experience.

Ironically, however, the biggest drain on his temper was not the toad woman or the ferret, as may have been expected. That distinction began to manifest itself in that ridiculous suggestion Luna had made that evening at dinner—the idea to start up a Defense Club. Sure he wanted to learn his Defense material for OWLs that year, and he would have participated in such a club had it existed, but the thought of running it himself was not something he wanted to consider. Not only did he not consider himself qualified to teach a class to his peers, but with his determination to improve his overall performance, he was certain that taking on a responsibility such as Luna had suggested would affect his other subjects, all of which he was not as comfortable with as he was with Defense. He felt it did not make sense to concentrate on a subject he was good at, to the expense of others which he felt required more effort.

His friends, however, did not see it that way. It became a frequent topic of conversation, not only among the training group, but also among some of their other friends in Gryffindor house. It seemed like hardly a day went by when someone would once again bring up the possibility of some sort of Defense Club. Then, inevitably, eyes would wander in his direction, comments would be made without any subtlety whatsoever, and Harry would find himself once again becoming annoyed with the topic.

The worst, of course, were his friends, who took every opportunity to point out that no one could match him with respect to Defense, and that they should really begin planning to start up the club. But though all of his friends got into it to a certain extent, the worst perpetrators were Fleur and Hermione. The latter especially, it seemed, was determined to see him lead this so-called club.

It reached a boiling point on the second Monday in October. Admittedly, Harry had been in a bit of a foul mood the whole day. Potions had been potions, and though Snape had let up on Harry specifically, he was still a strict and exacting disciplinarian. His classes were always stressful and never any fun, in Harry's mind. History and Divination were as they always were, but the worst was obviously Defense. That day, Umbridge had been particularly blatant in her attempts to bait Harry, and leaving the class, he was almost coming to the conclusion that it would be worth it to provoke the toad for the simple reason that he would finally be able to tell her exactly what he thought of her. Not even Hermione's tutoring in Runes—

which he curiously found rather enjoyable—was able to help Harry relax that evening. It was, therefore, a stressed and fed up Harry who was sitting with his friends in the Gryffindor common room that evening after dinner, puzzling through a Rune cluster which Hermione had given him to solve.

After the fact, Harry could not even say what it was that set him off. In hindsight, it was often this way—the most innocuous comments could have the most negative impact upon a person, causing them to react in a manner which could not have been predicted. A person's state of mind simply had a way of affecting them to behave abnormally at times. This was such a time.

"Hermione, will you just let it go already?" Harry snapped at Hermione when she once again broached the subject of the club.

It was a tone Harry rarely used—especially with Hermione—and the suddenness of it clearly took her aback.

"Harry, I—"

"No, Hermione!" Harry was practically yelling, and though he could see everyone in the common room stop to watch the spectacle, his frustration had boiled over and he was beyond caring who saw his tirade.

"You have continued to harp and harp on this, and you don't seem to get the picture. I don't want to lead any stupid club and I wish Luna had never come up with this harebrained idea at all. I'm sick of continually hearing about it from everyone—no one seems to respect my feelings in this matter. Now shut it! I don't want to hear about it again!"

Closing his textbook with a resounding crack, Harry stormed from the room, almost running over a firstie who was entering through the porthole with a friend. Harry dodged around her and, ignoring the look of curiosity she directed at him, he stalked away from the common room.

The next half hour saw Harry wandering through the school aimlessly, thinking about the school year thus far, and the events of the past weeks. It had not taken long for his anger to cool and his control to reassert itself, and as a consequence, he soon felt

ashamed for his outburst. He had never spoken to Hermione in such a way before—though they had certainly had disagreements and even spats—and he knew that she never expected it from him. She was due an apology, and he knew it would have to be made immediately.

Regardless, he was unwilling to return to the common room so soon after losing his cool—his mind needed a little soothing, and some solitary time spent thinking was just what was required.

It had been difficult at times, he decided, though there had certainly been bright spots. What he would not give for a year—just one!—where he didn't have to deal with all the crazy happenings in his life. And yet regardless of what he wanted, he found himself dealing with stupid and unqualified Defense professors who would like nothing better than to discredit him for her stupid employer, along with greasy, grudge-bearing potions masters (though Snape had certainly been better since they had cleared the air), and the ever-present interference from poncy, ferrety, bigoted gits with little manners and even fewer brains. As he had reflected before, it sometimes just did not pay to be Harry Potter.

Harry had just about decided it was time to return to the common room, when he turned a corner in the hallway and saw Hermione and Fleur walking toward him, both wearing expressions of determination on their faces.

"Come with us, Harry," Fleur instructed, and taking his hand in hers, she began pulling him along the corridor, with Hermione trailing behind. Harry avoided looking at his closest friend, not wanting to see the hurt on her face until he had to.

"That one's empty," Hermione said, pointing to a door on their right.

Glancing back at Hermione—completely forgetting his reluctance to look at her—Harry raised an eyebrow. Hermione merely smiled, holding up the Marauders' Map.

They stepped into the empty classroom, and closed the door. Fleur applied privacy charms to the room, while Hermione grabbed three chairs and positioned them close together. She motioned to a chair and took one of the others.

"Look Hermione," Harry began, "I'm sorry I lost it back there. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

Hermione smiled, and reached forward to pat Harry's knee. "It's all right, Harry. I shouldn't have kept on pushing you either."

"It is not all right," Fleur interrupted with a clipped tone. She seated herself in the third chair, and directed a pointed look at an abashed Harry. "This is exactly what we've spoken of—you have done well so far this year, but you still need to learn to control yourself better."

Harry mumbled that he knew and he was trying, and after a brief, but intense look, Fleur appeared to accept Harry's apology.

"We need to discuss this," she stated after a few moments. "You should not have spoken the way you did, Harry, but we have not handled this any better. We should have sat down from the beginning and talked about this, rather than pestering you about it."

Harry looked up in shock. "Fleur, I already said I don't want to do this."

"Why?" was her blunt query. "Why are you so against it?"

Sputtering, Harry's ire began to return. They simply would not leave this alone!

"Maybe because I'm not qualified," Harry growled. "Or maybe it's because I have enough on my plate with being a Prefect, trying to do my best in all my classes, not to mention Quidditch. I don't understand why you two are so insistent about this."

Sighing, Fleur reached out and grasped his hand once again, her thumb working circles on the back of it. It was clearly an attempt to calm him, and given her hands were soft, and her manner gentle and affectionate, Harry had to admit that it was working perfectly.

"Harry, we need to speak about this rationally. I don't think you've considered everything yet."

"What do you mean?"

"What we mean, is that Defense is not doing us any good, Harry," said Hermione. "And the way things are going so far, we may have to put up with her for the rest of the year."

"So how is that my problem?" Harry demanded. "Why is it my responsibility to make up the slack for her incompetence?"

"It isn't your responsibility, Harry," said Fleur. "But what everyone has been saying is correct—you are the best in Defense in the school. You are modest, which is a good trait, but you cannot deny the facts."

"And think about it, Harry," urged Hermione. "We came to school thinking that we would need some way to put the things that Moody taught us to good use. This is the perfect way to do it, and to train others at the same time."

"You will learn more that way, too," Fleur added. "Teaching others is a great way to learn yourself."

Harry almost felt like he was watching a tennis match, the way the two girls were going at him. But though he felt once again like they were pressuring him, he was not getting angry. He was beginning to become tired of the whole thing. Was that their plan? Browbeat him until he finally gave in only to get them to stop?

Once again Harry was shamed by his thoughts. They would not do that—they were both passionate in their beliefs and unwilling to give ground when they thought they were in the right, but they would never attempt to manipulate him in such a manner.

"Harry, what is it that really bothers you about this?" Fleur asked gently.

"I've already told you," said Harry, combing his hand through his hair. "Hermione's been after me since we came to Hogwarts to take my studies seriously, and I'm trying to do that. I'm comfortable with Defense—it's my best subject. I think I should be spending more time working on other subjects which I'm not as comfortable with, rather than getting involved in a time-consuming Defense Club."

Hermione and Fleur shared a look, and for a moment, Harry was almost amused—they had become so close in the last month that

they almost seemed to exchange entire conversations in the space of one glance.

"Do you think it will be all that bad?"

Harry shrugged. "I would think a lot of work goes into running a club like this."

"Who says you have to do it alone?"

"That's not what I meant," Harry said with some exasperation. "I am well aware that you were not intending me to do all the work on my own. That doesn't change the fact that running a club will be time-consuming and will pull our attention away from other things, like my other classes."

"I hardly think you have anything to worry about," soothed Hermione. "You do well in your studies, Harry, and your increased dedication is only going to help. I don't think this will take up so much of your time that you'll have to neglect your other classes."

Shaking his head, Harry returned Hermione's gaze. "I still don't think I can juggle this many things and not have my school work suffer."

The girls once again exchanged a glance, before Hermione gently leaned forward and grasped the hand which was not already held by Fleur. "Harry, why don't you tell us the real reason you don't want to do this?"

Sputtering, Harry glared at her, a look she returned with a placid, yet expectant, smile. "I think I've already told you."

"No you haven't. All the things you've said are all reasons, but I don't think they are the real reason why you're so set against this. You've always shared things like this with me before—why can't you now?"

Harry was frustrated with her continual pushing, and so snapped, "Is it wrong to want to have a normal year for once?"

"No, it isn't," Fleur soothed. "But you should consider that 'normal' is not a word which describes you, nor should it be something you aspire to be."



"What do you mean?"

"Harry, you are not normal," said Hermione affectionately. "You are a great Quidditch player and flyer, you are a prodigy in Defense, and you are loyal, intelligent, brave and cunning—a true mix of the four houses. The fact that you are the only known survivor of the killing curse does not even begin to scratch the surface of who you are as a person."

Feeling the heat rise to his cheeks, Harry looked away, embarrassed at the things they were saying about him. Harry did not consider himself to be all that—he was just Harry Potter, one of the guys. Others could have all the fame and fortune—he just wanted to be himself.

"Your relatives told all your life that you were not normal, right?" Fleur asked.

When Harry indicated that she was correct, she continued, "Regardless of what your relatives told you, their brand of normal is not something you should aspire to. You are not normal, Harry. You are a symbol of hope. You are a natural leader. Perhaps you should begin to act like one—strive to be exceptional. Normal people live in the world—exceptional people change the world."

In truth, Harry had never thought of the matter in that fashion. He had never felt like a born leader, or any other sort of leader—he had always just wanted to be a normal teenager and worry about normal things, not have the weight of the world upon his shoulders.

But the girls—possibly the two most important people in his life—were urging him to be more. Did he have it within him to be more? Did he even want to?

With these two pushing him, he knew he at least had a shot. He had known ever since entering this world that there was much wrong with it, much which could be fixed. Starting up a Defense Club was a small step, but it could turn into so much more. They were right in that Voldemort needed to be opposed, and perhaps it was the younger generation which needed to do so. There was no better way to begin the task of readying them than to start this club.

But regardless of his wants and desires, he knew that it was not likely, not with the damnable scar on his forehead, that he would ever be considered to be normal. Like it or not, he was a galvanizing figure, and others would follow him if he showed them the way. Perhaps Fleur was right and it was time to take a lead in taking the fight to Voldemort. Perhaps it was time to grow up.

"Can I think about it tonight?" Harry asked, not wanting to make a snap decision.

They smiled at him, assuring him that they did not have any intention of forcing him to do something he truly did not want to do.

"Harry," Hermione spoke up as they were getting up to leave, "I should apologize to you as well. I know I get a little..." she blushed and ducked her head, "single-minded when I decide something. I shouldn't have badgered you about the club."

"Yeah, Hermione, you're a Gryffindor," Harry said with a smirk. "Whatever you do, don't go badgering people. Otherwise, we'll all think you have become a Hufflepuff."

Groans and playful smacks on the shoulder met Harry's statement, but he grinned at Hermione, before placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Seriously, Hermione, don't worry about it. I know you are passionate in your beliefs, and whatever happens, I should never snap at you like that. I think I should be asking for your forgiveness."

"But you already did," was Hermione's impish reply.

"And I think we should let it rest now," said Fleur.

She stepped next to Harry, and soon her hand was comfortably ensconced within his own. Harry smiled at them both, indicating that he agreed with Fleur's statement, and the three ambled from the room and made their way back toward the Gryffindor common room. Harry, however, was still thinking about what had happened the past few hours, and he was beginning to wonder about his relationships with the two attractive girls with whom he was walking. Fleur was still somewhat of a mystery. They had made some progress—the little touches of affection, like their growing propensity to hold hands, were becoming more commonplace—and yet they were still very

much becoming accustomed to the situation in which they found themselves and getting to know one another. She was a beautiful and brilliant young woman, and Harry was certain that he could come to love her very easily. He was not willing to push the issue however, being more than content to relax allow their relationship to deepen without any artificial attempts which would just, in his opinion, make the process that much longer and more difficult.

As for Hermione, well in her case, Harry was not certain any longer what he was to think. Hermione was his best friend—it was a subject upon which he had contemplated many times in the past. He did not know where he would be without Hermione.

And that was part of the problem; he was now pledged to Fleur for the rest of his life, and he would not betray her in any way. However, the thought of losing what he had with Hermione caused Harry to feel an almost physical pain—he did not think he could do without her in his life. But what would happen as they got older? Surely some day some lucky bloke would see Hermione for what she was—a truly exceptional young woman. The man would then sweep her off her feet and they would marry. The thought troubled Harry excessively. Why? What did he truly feel for his best friend? Was he in love with her? He was not certain of his feelings, but he did know that he would not betray Fleur; such a thing was unthinkable.

They arrived at the portrait hole, Harry decided to put this thoughts out of his mind—it was a topic to be considered another day. They stepped into the common room and took their former seats, once again pulling out their homework which had been interrupted by Harry's outburst.

But as he worked on his homework, Harry could not help but notice Ron giving him dark looks as he worked on his own assignments. Knowing what his friend was likely about, Harry had to suppress a grin—it was quite the reversal for Ron to be angry with Harry for his treatment of Hermione. Mentally, Harry prepared himself for a confrontation, as Ron appeared as though he wanted to have it out. He did not have long to wait.

They had retired to the dormitories early—the day having been long and difficult, and Harry found himself tired and ready to head to bed early. When he approached his bed after brushing his teeth and

washing up, he was accosted by Ron who wore a very determined expression on his face.

"You were out of line tonight, Mate," he stated without preamble.

"I know, Ron," Harry replied.

The best way of dealing with Ron in a situation like this—not that he had much experience in this exact set of circumstances—was to agree with him and allow him to get his opinion off his chest. Ron's anger could be impressive when provoked, but it usually ran its course fairly quickly, unless he was of a mind to hold a grudge. Harry did not think he was in such a mood at this point.

"I've already apologized to Hermione, Ron, so you can leave off the big brother act."

Ron cocked his head to the side, clearly taken aback, yet thoughtfully considering Harry's words. He shook his head after a moment.

"All right then, but I hope you've worked it out."

"We have."

"Good, because I don't want you taking my place. I'm the one who makes her cry, and you're the one who sticks up for her."

Thinking that Ron's joke was in poor taste, Harry gazed pointedly at his friend.

"All right, all right," Ron conceded, his hands raised in surrender. "I know I've got some things to work on myself, and I've been trying, you know. But I've never seen you go at Hermione like that before, though if you'd done so, maybe I would have got my head out of my arse before now."

"What do you mean?" asked a curious Harry.

Ron sighed. "I guess I finally saw a bit of myself in the way you yelled at her," Ron admitted.

"It's not easy seeing something like that about yourself, is it?" Harry stated, with some sympathy.

"It isn't, Mate, but now I've finally figured it out, I figure I can do better with her. She doesn't want to go out with me, but she's still my friend. I know I need to treat her better to keep her as a friend."

Ron appeared as though he wanted to say something further, but he glanced around at the other three occupants of the room, and seemed to think better of it. He smiled hesitantly at Harry before saying good night and making his way to his bed.

Harry lay down on his bed, his mind immediately working over the problem of the Defense Club. Fleur and Hermione had not convinced him yet of the benefit of his leading it, but though he would have liked to dispute its necessity, he could not. Clearly this was something which would be a benefit for not only him and his friends, but for anyone who was invited to attend as well. Though he was tired, Harry was a long time falling asleep that night, and by the time he did, he had almost reconciled himself to appeasing his two closest female friends and agreeing to their request. First, however, there were a few things he wanted to make clear with them, and a few ground rules he thought would be necessary.

The next morning found the trio up earlier than usual. Though it was unplanned, all three gravitated to the common room before most of the other house members were up and, deciding that there was no time like the present, they made their way toward the Great Hall for breakfast.

Initially, when they sat down at the table, each of the three concentrated on their meal, and although Harry did not truly feel very hungry, he dutifully ate his breakfast. Thoughts of the proposed club and what he wanted to clarify with the girls rolled through his mind the entire time.

To either side, he could see the girls eying him somewhat nervously. Clearly they were convinced that this plan was the answer to their dilemma, though their behavior over the past weeks had been as much a hint as their current demeanors. That thought of course sent Harry off on a tangent, thinking that perhaps he should have been paying a little more attention, rather than focusing so much on his concerns and worries. Hermione was, after all, very intelligent, and

he had trusted her judgment in the past. If he had thought about it a little more, perhaps the previous evening's unpleasantness could have been avoided. There was obviously a lesson there, and one Harry was determined not to forget.

At length, however, he decided that as amusing as their behavior was in their attempts to act nonchalant, it was not getting them anywhere. Class time was approaching, and Harry really wanted to get this sorted out and make a decision now.

"All right, you two," he said, breaking the silence. "I suppose we should talk about this idea of yours."

The two young ladies acquiesced, and Harry continued. "You know what I'm worried about. Have either of you thought how you wanted to do this?"

Hermione was the first to speak. "Well, we don't have everything planned out..."

"What?" Harry demanded cheekily. "Hermione Granger doesn't have everything planned out yet? You must be slipping—usually you have it all done in advance."

"Prat!" Hermione exclaimed, followed with a swat.

Harry just grinned at her impudently.

His jest seemed to have the desired effect of breaking the tension somewhat. Hermione rolled her eyes and continued in a more normal tone of voice.

"Right. Well, Fleur and I figured that we could all share the planning and running of the club."

"We could create a basic plan of what we want to accomplish each week," Fleur spoke up. "We begin each week by demonstrating the spells we are teaching, and then we split the attendees off into groups. Depending on how many we have to each meeting, we could have our friends who trained with Moody each take control over a group and be responsible for helping the students in their group learn the spells. Then the three of us could act sort of like

roving instructors—we would go around the room helping out and giving additional demonstrations where required."

"And how much time would we need to prepare?" Harry asked.

"That depends on what we want to teach," said Hermione. Harry smiled at her, hearing the tone of her voice and knowing that she was going into her "lecture mode," which she so often did when she was explaining something.

"A lot of the spells we will need to teach we already know. For example, given what happened in the first war, we should likely teach the Patronus Charm as soon as possible. With Voldemort on the loose again, I would be surprised if he didn't get the Dementors to side with him. You already know that spell, Harry, so there wouldn't be much preparation."

"Moody taught us more than how to cast spells," Harry noted. "I presume you want to do more than that in the club too?"

The girls shared a glance. "Ideally, that would be best," Hermione said, speaking up for both of them. "Yes, part of the goal is to help people practice so they can pass their OWLs, but I think an equally important part is to train a group of students who will be able to defend themselves against the Death Eaters, and maybe even carry the fight back to them."

Harry frowned at the implication. "That's pretty dangerous, you know," he stated. "You're talking about turning school children into a fighting force—some of them could get killed."

"That is true, Harry," Hermione admitted, "but think about it: with Voldemort being back, we're all in danger already, and the danger will get worse the longer he is not stopped."

"And some are in even more danger," Fleur added. "What about Dean Thomas, who is a Muggleborn? Or the Patils or Cho Chang, who are not originally from England? Voldemort will not look kindly on them either because he considers them mongrels."

Harry had to admit they had a point. Reluctant as he was to form a fighting group which would inevitably put its members in danger, they already were, as Fleur had pointed out. At the very least, they

would be helping others learn to defend themselves, which would only be of benefit for them, and the entire wizarding world.

He was about to speak when Hermione nudged him, while throwing a significant glance at Fleur. Harry took it as he thought Hermione intended—someone was approaching who they definitely did not want to overhear their current conversation.

"Mr. Potter," the cloying tones of his new personal nemesis interrupted them.

Harry turned to see the hideously pink-clad Defense professor standing nearby, while affixing the students with her normally false cheerful gaze.

"You and your... friends are here early today, Mr. Potter," Umbridge trilled in her girlish voice.

However, Harry did not miss the emphasis on the word "friends", nor did he miss the implication that Umbridge thought both of his closest friends as lower than dirt. He would dearly have liked to respond and put the woman in her place, but the events of the previous day and his discussion with the two girls about the need to hold his temper made resisting the temptation that much easier. But that did not stop him from wanting to witness the payback which he would make certain the detestable woman eventually received. Yes, she would receive it, he promised himself. Her, and all others like her.

"Just wanted to get an early start on the day," Harry responded in a chipper and eager tone of voice which he had learned truly annoyed the toad woman. It was, after all, the only weapon in his arsenal against her, at present, and he had come to the point where he had begun to use it often, especially when he felt himself in danger of giving in and snapping at the woman.

Umbridge sniffed with ill-concealed disdain. "Very commendable of you, I am sure."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry continued in the same tone. "I am trying my best."

Umbridge did not say anything in response. Rather, she directed an expression of sweet approval—with which she attempted to cover



the malice in her eyes—at Harry, and walked away toward the staff table, her nose held higher in the air than was her wont.

Grinning at his friends, Harry motioned to the entrance. The three gathered their things and left the Great Hall to find a location more conducive to a private discussion. After all, it was somewhat silly of them to have been discussing this in the Great Hall in the first place. There were too many eyes to see and ears to hear.

They made their way from the hall and through the school, eventually stopping in the same classroom in which they had had their discussion the evening before. They settled down to speak once Fleur had once again cast privacy spells.

"What about Umbridge?" Harry asked without preamble.

"What about her?" said Hermione.

"Well, I assume you don't want her to know about this."

It was a question and not a statement, but Hermione nodded her head in agreement anyway.

"That means that we won't be telling any of the other professors either?"

"Plausible deniability, Harry," Hermione responded. "We don't want Umbridge to have any ammunition she could use to try to take over the school, so if our professors don't know what we're doing, then they can't be held responsible."

Harry frowned. "But we can."

"Perhaps," interjected Fleur. "But what could be done to us? Starting up a group like this is not against school rules, after all, and the only ones who may take exception are Fudge and Umbridge, and then only because they are paranoid that Dumbledore is trying to take over the Ministry. If Dumbledore is able to state, even under Veritaserum, that he had no knowledge of what we were doing, then any suspicion is deflected off him, and onto us. The worst we would get is a slap on the wrist for failing to clear the club with one of the professors."

It was well thought out, but it would have to be, considering it was Fleur and Hermione's brainchild. And it just may work. There were only a few other things he wanted to work out before he agreed to it.

"You mentioned that we would act like instructors. What about our practice time?"

"Why Harry, have you forgotten we need to prepare?" asked Hermione impishly. "On the nights we run the club we would instruct, but we could have our own practice sessions with our friends on other nights. And besides, I think there would be plenty of practicing going on while instructing."

"We could even run some dueling tournaments," said Fleur with some excitement. "That would help us all know where we stand and where we need to improve."

"Good idea," said Harry, "though I think some of the younger students might find themselves in over their heads."

"So, have some mini-tournaments then," suggested Hermione. "Rank everyone based on how well they are doing, and have several smaller tournaments."

It was a good idea, and a perfect way to put Moody's advice to work. "What about the location?"

"That we haven't figured out yet," admitted Hermione. "We obviously need a place where we won't be interrupted or found out by Umbridge, but I'm not sure of where we could do it."

"Well," began Harry slowly, "if nothing else, there's always the chamber."

Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste. "From what you've told me, Harry, it doesn't sound like a very good place to spend several hours."

"No," Harry agreed, "but it's very secure. I doubt that Umbridge is a Parselmouth, so there's no way she'd be able to catch us."

"True, but she could catch us going in or out of it—I think we should look for a better place."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. As the only one of the three who had ever been down to the chamber, he was well aware of the fact that it was not truly suitable for their needs. Needless to say, the millennia of filth which had built up down there would not help matters either. They would need to find a better place, and he figured the first place to start looking was to ask Fred and George—if anyone knew of such a place, it would be the Gryffindor pranksters.

"Have you two got a list together of who you want to invite?"

"Does this mean you're going to do it?"

"Looks like I don't have a choice," said Harry with a smirk. "You two will pester me until I agree, so I might as well save myself from being annoyed by just agreeing now."

A glowing Fleur let out a little squeak and hugged Harry, pressing her lips against his cheek. What surprised Harry, however, is that Hermione mirrored Fleur's actions from Harry's right side, so Harry found to his astonishment, that he had two soft pairs of lips attached to his cheeks.

It did not last long. Hermione seemed to immediately realize what she was doing, and she blushed and pulled away. A quick glance at Fleur showed that she was not angry at Hermione's presumption—as a matter of fact, she appeared rather amused at the brunette's actions. Hermione did not say anything, but it was clear she was embarrassed, if her pink cheeks and nervous glances were any indication.

"Well, it's not every day a guy gets kissed on the cheeks by two pretty girls," Harry deadpanned.

Hermione's blush deepened and she began stammering, presumably to apologize. Fleur cut her off, though, with a bit of well-placed humor to complement what Harry had said.

"We had better be careful, Hermione," said in a dry tone of voice. "Harry's going to get a swelled head with this kind of attention."

Giggling in spite of her embarrassment, Hermione made a great show of gathering her things and rising. She looked to her two

friends and with exaggerated casualness said, "Well, shall we head off to classes?"

Harry shook his head and rose, assisting Fleur to her feet. He then wrapped his arms around both girls and ushered them from the room.

"I think you're right, Hermione," he said. "I'm sure glad I have you two around to keep me grounded. You two are the best."

Both girls beamed as they allowed him to lead them from the room.

Sitting in the small breakfast nook, Sirius Black was enjoying his meal, his newspaper, and the new direction his life had taken.

These French certainly know how to eat breakfast, he thought as he savored his sweet treat. A chocolate filled croissant was something one would rarely find in England as a breakfast food and Sirius, who had been legendary at Hogwarts for his sweet-tooth, took every opportunity now to indulge. He deserved it, he thought, considering the hell on earth in which he had been imprisoned for more than twelve years.

He glanced around, noting the tastefully decorated and comfortable furnishings of the Delacour home, noting the difference between this affluent family dwelling, and the dark and dirty hole in which he had been raised. The Delacours had insisted he treat the chateau as his home during the course of his sojourn in France, and he found that he was very happy and at ease here. It did not hurt that the Delacour house-elves saw to his every need and fondly looked to him as a member of their human family. It was the perfect place to rest, recuperate, and get his life back in order, and one which he was happy to have at his disposal. And though he would not have thought that the solitude would suit him, due to his gregarious and social personality, he found that dealing with the demons in his mind often required a quiet and undisturbed location. And when he felt like it, he had made a few acquaintances in France, and the Delacours were just a short Portkey journey away—being friendly with someone of Jean-Sebastian's influence in France certainly did have its perks. Jean-Sebastian was well on the way to becoming a good friend and powerful ally, and Appoline was lovely and welcoming. It appeared that he had chosen well when he had made the decision to involve them in Harry's life.

Sirius's recovery was for the most part going smoothly. Though he was still plagued at times with nightmares of his time in Azkaban, and at times he brooded over the unfairness of life, those times were becoming fewer and further in between. All in all, his therapist assured him that he was making tremendous progress.

Chuckling, Sirius thought of the woman he saw twice weekly as his therapist. She was the one part of his recovery which was not proceeding according to plan. Audrey St. Laurent was a tall, statuesque blond, who was—unaccountably—still single, though she was older than Sirius by a few years. Naturally Sirius, as a self-proclaimed ladies' man, had immediately become infatuated with the beautiful woman, but thus far all his attempts at coming to know her intimately had failed. In fact, she seemed to take great satisfaction from shooting him down and reminding him at every opportunity that it was inappropriate for a mind healer to be seeing her patient in any capacity which was not professional.

Ah well, Sirius reflected, it was more the fun of the chase than the catching of the prey, after all. For now, he was having fun honing his flirting abilities, which had rusted during his stay at Chateau Azkaban, needless to say—Dementors were not exactly adept at the practice—and generally attempting to make the woman blush. Not that he was having that much success in that endeavor either...

Soon he would be ready to return to England and build a new life with his godson, taking his rightful place in society, and once again defying and spitting in Voldemort's eye. He was determined that Lily and James would have their justice, and he would use every knut of the Black family fortune to see it done if necessary.

His musings were cut short by the sight of an owl drifting in through an open window and landing on the table in front of him. Sirius promptly removed the parchment from the owl's leg, while Matty popped in and placed a dish of water and a generous helping of owl treats in front of the bird. Since it did not appear to be eager to depart again, Sirius assumed the owl was waiting for a reply.

He opened the letter and though he was somewhat surprised at its contents, he was not at all displeased with it. In fact...

A devilish grin slipped over Sirius's face, as he contemplated the possibility for a prank—as a Marauder at heart, such an opportunity could not be allowed to slip away without taking it up.

At his request, the house-elf provided him with a quill and parchment, and Sirius set about drafting his reply. He could hardly wait—things were looking up in Sirius Black's world.

For the next few days, Harry, Hermione, and Fleur, along with the rest of their friends, who were quickly brought into the discussion, debated the composition of those who would be invited to join their proposed club. It was perhaps unsurprising that just about every Gryffindor of Harry's year and up were on the list—and a few from the younger years as well. However, though Gryffindors constituted most of the planned club members, there were a number of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws who, after some debate, were considered trustworthy enough to receive invitations.

The one task, in which they did not have any success, was in locating a suitable room for their meetings. Harry was insistent that they had to find a place which was almost foolproof in its defenses and simply commandeering an unused classroom and placing protective charms on it was not good enough. In addition, the members had to be made aware of the location and times of the meetings. To offset this problem, Hermione and Fleur charmed a number of coins with a protean charm to alert potential club members of the times of future meetings. Once they had a meeting place, they would rely on their members to spread the word to their friends, and ultimately to all those who were in the list for possible membership. However, they were completely at a standstill until a location could be determined.

Through all of this, Fleur gave as much assistance as she was able, but for the most part she simply listened and absorbed what she could of what her friends were saying. She was the newcomer to the school, and as such, she could not give much advice on the other students, after all, and she was by far the least familiar with the castle. On the planning side, she, Hermione and Harry worked closely to come up with a list of activities for the club, once they were able to officially get it off the ground.

Other than that, Fleur's days were spent with her friends and housemates, getting to know everyone, and learning what she could

about the new school she found herself attending. A month had gone by and Fleur was quickly adjusting to the new school. It was different from Beauxbatons, but not necessarily in a bad way, the major difference, of course, being the house system, which did not exist in her old school. As a result, though the student body of Beauxbatons still had its share of cliques and rivalries, it was in no way comparable to the rivalries which existed at Hogwarts.

It was almost incomprehensible, but true—it seemed that generally only the barest of relationships existed between members of the different houses. There were of course some exceptions, but Fleur came to understand that those exceptions often seemed to be between those friends who had known one another before coming to school. In general, the houses interacted on only the most rudimentary of levels, and when they did, it was almost always with a certain distrust and wariness. And heaven forbid a Gryffindor and a Slytherin actually speak to one another without resorting to threats and intimidation. Fleur quickly became aware of the fact that Luna being part of their group was somewhat of an oddity, as normally she would be expected to stick with "others of her own house." The fact that very few in her own house seemed to tolerate the quirky girl, much less like her, added to the fact that she had been Ginny's childhood friend, seemed to make it easier for her to associate with mostly Gryffindors. However, she was an exception, rather than the rule.

All in all, though, Fleur found herself content with her new home, and happy to be there. Here in Hogwarts, she felt that she had gained some true friends for the first time in her life, and possibly more importantly—acceptance. And, she was becoming closer to Harry and Hermione all the time.

The one thing which was not going well was her time in Defense class. She could not claim to have been singled out to the extent that Harry had, but she was well aware of the professor's opinion of her, from the way Umbridge ignored her whenever possible, to the barely concealed contempt which she was favored with whenever the woman did actually acknowledge her.

The Friday after they had finally persuaded Harry to start the club, Fleur gathered her books and departed the Defense classroom in the company of the other Gryffindors. Due to the size of the class and the number of students who had either not obtained the grades

sufficient to continue on to NEWT Defense, or had not continued with the subject, the entire seventh year was taught in one large class, which was scheduled for Wednesdays and Fridays. As such, she was also in class with some of the few acquaintances she had made the previous year, primarily with Ravenclaw house, with whom she and her Beauxbatons schoolmates had usually taken their meals.

She had begun to walk from the room in the company of the Weasley twins when a voice calling her name prompted her to stop.

"Hello Fleur," Roger Davies said as she turned.

She returned his greeting in a friendly manner, which was the mirror of his own. Roger was, quite honestly, and enigma to Fleur. To say that he had been an uninspiring date at the ball was a massive understatement. She had agreed to accompany him, in part, due to the fact that he had asked her to the ball with every appearance of composure and confidence, and as the thought of spending the entire evening with a drooling sycophant had been unappealing, she had thought he would be a good choice.

Sadly, she had been mistaken. Once he had been able to secure her as a date, it appeared the composure had deserted him, and the entire evening she had felt like she was drying herself off from the continual drool that even the small leak of her allure had engendered. Most of those in attendance had thought that she and Roger had left the ballroom late in the festivities for an "intimate interlude" in the gardens; Fleur had laughed long and hard when Harry had told her of the speculation. In reality, Fleur had become tired of his constant adulation, and her feet had become sore because of his continued inability to stay off her toes when dancing. She had left to return to the Beauxbatons carriage, only to be followed by an amorous Roger. Fortunately, it had taken nothing more than a small burst of her allure to render him a gibbering idiot and allow her to make her escape, to nurse her toes and curse the unfairness of her life.

This year, Roger appeared to have overcome his susceptibility to her allure, and he could always be counted on to stop to talk to her in the hallways, or to exchange a few words in class. She was certain he was a good sort of boy, but something about his manner seemed to suggest to her that he was still influenced by her far more



than he ought. She therefore attempted to limit the times of contact, and exchange only the pleasantries with him if at all possible.

"I haven't seen you in a while," Roger commented as they continued to walk from the room.

"Well, you know how it is," Fleur responded vaguely. Roger was on the list of those to invite to the Defense Club, but Fleur did not want to let the cat out of the bag too early. "With schoolwork and everything that's going on with Defense class, things have been a little hectic."

"True. Seems crazy that it's already NEWT year, doesn't it?"

Fleur smiled and agreed, and they walked on in silence.

"Are you looking forward to your first trip to Hogsmeade?" continued Roger after a moment.

"I am—anything to get out of this castle. I never thought a building this big could become so stifling, but I am looking forward to leaving it for a while."

"Just wait until January," Roger replied with a smirk. "Scottish winters are not pleasant, you know."

Fleur, having grown up in the south of France, shivered a little theatrically. "Don't remind me," she said, remembering the previous winter at Hogwarts.

"So what are your plans for the Hogsmeade weekend?" he asked.

Glancing sidelong at him, Fleur wondered what he was getting at. He had to know the group she associated with, not to mention her betrothal to Harry—could she really have any other plans than to go to Hogsmeade with them?

"Harry and Hermione have promised to show me around the village," she said.

A flicker of something passed over his face, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared, and Fleur was unable to decipher it. "It's good to see they are taking care of you," was his only enigmatic

reply. He then excused himself with a friendly good bye, and strode off in the direction of his common room.

Their interactions always seemed to be this way—short, desultory, and lacking in any substance whatsoever. What was he about? His little conversations which he initiated from time to time seemed innocuous enough, but Fleur could not help but wonder if he had some other objective in mind when they spoke. He would often make small talk as he had only moments ago, but he also avoided any conversation about Harry, or any of her other friends. She did not sense any sort of malice from him, but she also could not feel entirely comfortable with him either.

Shrugging, Fleur put it from her mind. Aside from Roger and Luna, and a few other acquaintances she had made the previous year, Fleur had very little direct contact with anyone other than her own housemates. The atmosphere in the school was simply not conducive to creating lasting friendships with the members of other houses. If nothing else, the club they were planning would be good in the sense that it would at the very least promote some interaction between members of the disparate houses, and possibly a little cooperation at the same time. The school could only benefit from it.

As for the other girls with whom she had not yet become acquainted, whether they regarded her in the same light as her Beauxbatons contemporaries had, or were just simply not interested due to the fact that she was not one of their own, she could not say. The one thing she could say with absolute certainty was that the Slytherins by and large viewed her as little more than an intelligent animal. In fact, some of the looks she received from certain members of that house—particularly the older boys—brought nightmarish stories of kidnapped Veela sold into sexual slavery to her mind. Though the world was in general more civilized now, such traffic did still exist, a fact which accounted for some of her father's protectiveness toward her and Gabrielle. Some of those Slytherin boys—particularly Malfoy and his cronies—would be only too happy to use her and sell her, she thought. She was glad she had the protection of her friends, as the school would be a very nervous place without it.

A/N: It's a little late and I rewrote rather large swaths of it (and am still not completely happy with parts), but here it is. Hope you all enjoyed it.

One thing I did want to say to those who were not happy that it seemed okay that Molly did not offer an apology in the last chapter: oh ye of little faith. Harry and Hermione have not forgotten the incident, and until she makes her apology, the matter certainly is not closed.

I'm tired now. It's off to bed for me.

## Chapter 18 – The Defense Club

By the time the weekend rolled around, Harry was ready to leave the castle for a day in Hogsmeade. His studies had been going well, plans for their Defense club were proceeding—with the obvious exception of where they were going to hold it—and all in all, regardless of the presence of Umbridge, Harry found himself more content in the school than he had ever felt before. But as much as he was enjoying school this year—aside from Defense and potions, of course—it had not exactly been a relaxing year. The opportunity to escape from the castle for a few hours was welcome.

The Gryffindor upper years had decided to go to the village as a group, though they would likely go their separate ways once they actually got there. A funny thing had happened in that the fifth years were largely friendly with the seventh years—of course Fleur, the twins, Angelina and Alicia being seventh years—but the sixth years, with the exception of Katie Bell, were not part of their clique. For Harry this was not a great loss as the sixth year group was very small, and other than Katie Bell—who of course he had known as part of the Quidditch team since arriving at Hogwarts—the only other sixth year with whom he was at all familiar was Cormac McLaggen. And since Harry was not especially enamored with arrogance as a character trait, he was quite willing to ignore the ponce's very existence.

After breakfast, Harry returned to his room to gather his winter clothing, before making his way back down to the common room where he waited for the others to return. A few moments later he was greeted by the sight of his fiancée descending the stairs. Fleur had dressed herself in a light blue jacket which was befitting of chill in the air, and though her jeans were fit snugly, they did not appear to be painted on like some he had seen in the Muggle world. She had on a pair of soft leather boots and to complete the ensemble, her hair was pulled up in a French braid, covered by a white, woolen hat in the beret style.

Harry was mesmerized—she was absolutely stunning. He walked over to her and bowed slightly, taking her hand and tenderly bestowing a kiss upon it. "Hello Fleur—you are looking absolutely beautiful this morning."

Fleur giggled lightly at his gallantry. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek affectionately. "Thank you, Harry. You are not looking so bad yourself."

"Smooth, Loverboy," said a grinning Hermione as she descended the stairs behind Fleur. "Looks like there may be some hope for him after all," she commented to Fleur.

"Oh, I think with the right guidance Harry will work out just fine," Fleur responded as she stepped to Harry's side and took his arm in her hand.

"Perhaps I am hopeless," was Harry's pleasant reply. "But it doesn't take a genius to recognize beauty when it stares you in the face."

This time Fleur actually did blush lightly, though it was evident in her fond smile that she was more than pleased with Harry's comments.

Harry kept hold of Fleur's hand on his arm, and when the entire group had gathered, he switched to take her hand as they made their way down toward the entrance hall laughing and joking with one another along the way. There, they met Luna, before they finally made their way out of the entrance and down toward the village.

It was a fine October morning and the air was clear and crisp without being cold as it would become in later months. All in all, Harry felt it was a good day, with his closest friends at his side, and his beautiful fiancée walking next to him, hand ensconced in his, talking animatedly with his closest female friend.

The sight of Hermione and Fleur getting along so well brought a smile to his face, and considering Hermione's apathetic attitude toward Fleur the previous year, it was a marvel that they were now such close friends. They shared everything: confidences, gossip—inasmuch as Hermione gossiped—and they were fiercely protective of one another, and of him. It was very satisfying, he decided, to have two such wonderful girls so concerned about him. He liked it very much, he decided.

They had walked for several moments, the group fluidly shifting places and talking amongst themselves, though Harry kept his grip on Fleur's hand, and Hermione kept her place by Fleur's side. They

had just left Hogwarts grounds when Harry found Ginny walking by his side.

"Hey, Harry," Ginny said, with just a trace of a blush. "How's it going?"

Harry smiled, indicating to her that all was well, and they walked for a few moments exchanging pleasantries of the sort which friends sometimes do.

"Have you found a place for the Defense Club yet?" she asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"Not yet," Harry admitted. "We've thought of a bunch of different possibilities, but nothing that will keep us safe from Umbridge."

"Have you tried asking someone else?" said Ginny after a moment's consideration.

"Like professors or such?" Harry asked. When she nodded Harry replied, "We'd prefer not to involve the professors, they can truthfully say that they knew nothing of the club if it is ever discovered."

"Keep at it, Harry," she said. "I'm sure you'll figure something out. You can do anything you put your mind to."

She then hurried forward to walk next to Luna, while Harry watched her with a bemused smile. Ginny appeared to be much more at ease around him lately, and though he was grateful for her newfound confidence, her tendency to shower him with praise, state her confidence in his abilities, or stare longingly at him at times prompted him to wish for a little less of her attention. She was obviously not truly over her crush of him, even though he was grateful for her attempts to act normally in his presence. She was a very nice girl, he had decided, and had the situation with Fleur been different, and his relationship with Hermione not been quite so close, he admitted, he might have been interested in Ginny.

Putting the problem of Ginny from his mind for a moment, Harry glanced back at his two companions, only to find that Fleur was eying Ginny with a look which contained no small measure of animosity. He exchanged a look with Hermione on Fleur's other side, but Hermione merely smiled at him and shrugged. It only lasted a

moment before Fleur glanced in his direction, smiled, and returned to her conversation with Hermione.

Puzzled, Harry returned to his own thoughts. Though the older witch was not openly antagonistic, there were times where Harry got the distinctive impression that Fleur did not truly like Ginny. No, perhaps it was not that she did not like Ginny; it was more that Fleur had a tendency to watch Ginny, like a dragon circled its next meal. Fleur must know of Ginny's crush—it was not precisely a secret, after all, and at times it was blatantly obvious. It was almost as though she felt it necessary to warn the younger girl away from her territory, and made no bones about the fact that Ginny was not allowed to show Harry any affection which was anything more than friendly. Her behavior was understandable, considering they were all but engaged, but strangely, it was only Ginny who was subjected to this scrutiny from Fleur. Not even Hermione...

Harry had to turn his head to hide a sudden burst of embarrassment, and what he assumed was his flaming cheeks. He had thought over and over again about what had happened during the previous week, and he could still not make it out. Fleur kissing him on the cheek was no big deal—she had done it on occasion since they had become betrothed and Harry had gotten used to her displays of affection. Hermione had also done it once or twice, he reflected, so that was not exactly out of the ordinary either. But both of them at the same time? And without Fleur getting all territorial and protective? That was what confused Harry. Whereas Ginny definitely received the cold shoulder from Fleur at times—though Harry had to allow that if Ginny was trying to flirt with him, her attempts were painfully awkward, even by Harry's standards!—Hermione, whose shows of affection were transparent and obvious, was not subjected to the same treatment.

It did not make sense. From all Harry knew of girls—and he was willing to admit he was somewhat clueless when it came to the fairer sex—he would have thought that Hermione's action would have had Fleur's wand out in an instant. Moreover, Harry was convinced that if Ginny had done the same, a drawn wand and some harsh words would have been on the mild end of Fleur's reaction. But regardless of would haves and suspicions, Fleur had merely looked amused at Hermione's behavior. Amused! It was almost as though Fleur had expected it, and was happy it had finally occurred. Why were the rules different for two different girls? Again, Harry would have

thought the roles would have been reversed. He had spent every free moment the past four years with Hermione, while Ginny had merely been Ron's younger sister. If anything, Hermione would seem to be the greater threat.

Whatever was happening, Harry was determined to figure it out. It was no use asking them, he knew—they would only laugh and spout something about girls needing their secrets, if he did not somehow manage to offend them with his questions. No, he would have to simply keep a close eye on them and figure it out for himself.

Pushing those thoughts to the back of his mind for the time being, Harry considered his fiancée, whose animated conversation with Hermione was continuing unabated. He was a lucky man, he decided, as he watched her. The morning sunlight streamed down through the Scottish morning, illuminating the pale gold of her hair, causing it to glow and sparkle. The chill in the air had pinked her cheeks and nose, heightening her already ethereal beauty, stopping the breath in his throat. Not even this morning as she had come down the stairs or her appearance at the ball had been as completely enchanting as the image she now presented.

And it was not just her appearance, he decided. She was kind and considerate to all she knew, she was intelligent and competent, and she was highly personable and approachable, once you were able to penetrate the veneer of haughtiness she erected to protect herself. There was much to like; in fact, if he had known her this well last year, he could not imagine not becoming highly infatuated with her then. As a betrothed, well he was not quite certain yet. Infatuation with a young woman he was coming to know was one thing, but in a marriage relationship, he did not think that infatuation was enough—it would wear off sooner or later. They had made significant strides in becoming friends, and for the time being that was enough for Harry—he figured the more romantic feelings would come naturally, the more time he spent with her. She was a wonderful person, and to a certain extent, he considered himself lucky that he had become her betrothed.

"Umm, Harry," a voice from slightly behind him broke him out of his reverie.

Filing his thoughts away for later, Harry turned and noticed Ron regarding him somewhat nervously.



"Hey Ron," Harry said cheerfully. "What's up?"

"Can I talk to you alone for a few seconds?"

Curious, Harry agreed and, suspecting by Ron's nervousness and demeanor that the conversation was to be private, he dropped back, creating some space between themselves and the rest of their friends. He was not so insensible, however, that he did not recognize the knowing glances exchanged by Ginny and Hermione. Clearly they had known something was up.

The redhead walked by his side for several moments, apparently trying to work up his courage to say whatever he had in mind. Harry was content to allow him the space he needed; this was Ron's show.

"Harry, I just wanted to talk to you for a moment," Ron finally began. "I think I owe you an apology for the way I've acted."

"There's no need, Ron," Harry interrupted. "I thought we were past all that."

"But we're not," Ron insisted. "Harry, I know you are generally quick to forgive people, and you're a good person for it. But sometimes apologies need to be made, not only to put the matter in the past, but also to allow the person apologizing to make amends."

"Wow, Ron," said Harry with some amusement, "that's pretty deep for you."

"Oi, there's no need to be insulting," cried Ron. The good-natured smile on his face, however, belied his protestation.

"Okay then, Ron. Say what you need to say."

"Thanks, Harry," Ron replied, before he became serious again. "I know I acting wrongly during the tournament last year, and I guess my only excuse is my jealousy. I've truly enjoyed being your friend, not to mention the adventures we've had, and I want you to know that I was never in it to get close to the Boy-Who-Lived."

"And I've never thought you were," Harry said.

"That's just because you are a good person, Harry. I know I've not always given you reason to believe that. Thanks for your faith in me.

"A few things have happened, though, and they've opened my eyes."

Harry regarded him curiously. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I was... talking with Hermione, and she mentioned some things and got me thinking. Then, there is the fact that you are... different now."

"Different?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"Yeah. You are a lot more confident and at ease with others. I guess I have to put it all down to the fact that you have a loving a supportive family now."

Ron was quiet for several moments, thinking about what he wanted to say, and his silence allowed Harry to consider the matter himself. Was he all that changed since the Delacours had come into his life? The answer was obvious, and he knew immediately that Ron definitely had a point. He did feel more confident now that he had a family's support, and that confidence extended not only to his schoolwork and his determination to do better, but also to his interactions with others. He liked it, he decided instantly, and he liked the direction his life was now going, with the exception, of course, of the continual thorn in his side that was Voldemort.

"I know that the Delacours support you far more than your relatives ever did, and I can see the good this has done you. I finally realized that though I was somewhat jealous of what you have, you have at times been equally jealous of what I have. It kind of put things in perspective, you know?"

"I do, Ron," replied Harry.

"I don't really have anything to be jealous over, so I've decided to try to see others the way they see themselves. Like walking in their shoes, I guess.

"That's why I wanted to apologize for my behavior last year and even to a certain extent this year."

"And what about Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Well, I'm not happy that she wouldn't go out with me—I won't lie about that," Ron said after taking in a shuddering breath. "But she has the right to choose, just the same as anyone else.

"I can still hope that she will change her mind, though," Ron said with a sudden grin.

Harry laughed. "I guess you can at that. She's only sixteen, after all."

"Exactly!" Ron then got a sly look on his face, and he adopted a pose of manly nonchalance, while brushing his fingernails on his coat. "I figure I just have to give her some time to realize what she's been missing out on," he said pompously. "After all, a strapping, handsome lad like me—I'm betting she can't resist!"

Harry laughed at his friend's antics, joined a moment later by Ron. "Seriously, though, Hermione's a big girl and like I said, she has the right to choose. I'm not going to pine for her—I'd prefer to continue to be her friend."

"Good," said Harry. "I accept your apology, Ron, and I thank you for it. To be honest, I've always felt your biggest problem is your tendency to react without thinking."

"I know, and I've been working on that."

"Brilliant! Then, as far as I'm concerned, there is nothing else to say. Why don't we catch up with everyone?"

Ron responded with a grin and he quickened his pace until they had once again caught up with the group. Harry noticed a number of curious looks among those of their group who did not seem to be in the know about what had just happened, but when asked, Harry just told them, rather blandly, that it was guy talk and nothing serious.

Stepping into Hogsmeade for the first time was almost like stepping back into the eighteenth century. It was a quaint little village of steep thatched roofs, and sharply canted eaves, with colorful signs of the different shops all the way up and down High Street, which was the main avenue running through the heart of the village. It was not large, perhaps housing less than one thousand souls altogether.

However, as Fleur understood it, Hogsmeade was somewhat of an alternative to the busier—and likely pricier—Diagon Alley, and as such, High Street was usually bustling during the day at any time of the year. Of course, the biggest days of the year were reserved for Hogsmeade weekends, in which the students of the nearby school would descend upon the village in droves, eager to spend their parents' hard-earned money.

Fleur was enchanted immediately. The main shopping thoroughfare in Paris was similar to Diagon Alley, with a definite French flavor, of course, and though there were others scattered throughout France, none that Fleur had seen looked like they had appeared straight off the illustration on a Christmas card. The village was homey and welcoming, and Fleur immediately determined that she could spend several hours quite contentedly perusing the shops.

Of course, wandering through the village would have to wait as, once they arrived, Hermione immediately dragged Fleur off to Tomes and Scrolls, the local bookstore. Fleur's amused glance back at Harry showed that he was not in the least surprised at his best friend's antics, and after he exchanged a few words with the rest of the group, he followed along behind them. Fleur was certainly not unwilling; though she was not the same level of bibliophile as Hermione, but she happy to expand her personal library, and was more than willing to put up with the eccentricity of the other girl.

They spent some time in the bookstore—not that an outing with Hermione could have any other result—but that was not all. Harry and Hermione, with some help from their other friends, with whom they crossed paths several times—Ron and Neville in particular spent most of their time with the trio—showed her the highlights of the village. Their visits included Gladrags' Wizardwear—where, Fleur was treated to the unlikely sight of several very smelly, screaming socks in the front window—Scrivenshafts, where Hermione purchased some extra quills, and Honeydukes, where they indulged in an assortment of the establishment's sweet and tasty treats. They even strode down to the end of the street to gaze at the Shrieking Shack, Harry and Ron relating the events of their third year, and the confrontation with Sirius Black.

The return journey toward the Three Broomsticks—which was where Harry had agreed they would all meet—led them past Zonko's, where they found Lee Jordan and the twins, perhaps somewhat

unsurprisingly, given what Fleur knew of their general proclivities. The group stopped in the shop and exchanged a few laughing remarks with the twins before Fleur, who did not intend to buy anything, stepped from the shop to escape the press of eager students. Finding a bench across the street from the shop, she sat and watched as her friends laughed and talked.

She had not been sitting long, enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun, when she was joined by a smiling Roger Davies.

"Hello Fleur," he greeted her as he sat down on the bench. "How are you enjoying your first visit to Hogsmeade?"

"Very interesting," said Fleur with a smile. "We don't really have anything like this in France. I feel like I've stepped through time to come here."

"It's pretty different, all right," Roger said as he sat down behind her. "But then again I suppose Hogwarts is a lot different from Beauxbatons."

"In some ways," Fleur confirmed. "But essentially it's still just a school, and an old one with many traditions much as Hogwarts."

"So the transition has been easy for you?"

"I don't know about easy," was Fleur's response. "The language and the different culture have been a bit of a problem at times, but it has been a new experience for me and for the most part an enjoyable one. I told you that things weren't always easy for me at Beauxbatons. The best part of being at Hogwarts is finding acceptance with a group of friends."

Roger paused a moment and shot a glance in the direction of the joke shop. Following his gaze, Fleur could see Harry and Hermione laughing with Ron through the shop window, looking like they had not a care in the world. A large part of that acceptance of which she had just spoken, she knew, was due to her connection with Harry and the fact that his friends had accepted her on his recommendation. However, she felt as though she was also liked for who she was, and this extended not only to Harry and his friends, but others as well—especially Angelina, Alicia and Katie, all of

whom treated her as though they had known her for years. It was a wonderful feeling to be part of the group.

She returned her gaze to her companion, only to see him staring back at her with a look of intense concentration. "I'm glad you have found some acceptance here."

"Thank you," she replied.

"And how is it being on the arm of a celebrity?" Roger suddenly asked.

Surprised, Fleur paused for a moment. Roger had always avoided the topic of Harry in their past conversations, so his sudden desire to discuss the state of her relationship with him was a complete departure from his earlier behavior.

"It's not really like that," she finally said. "Harry is so unpretentious that he doesn't pay any attention to those things. He's happy just being Harry."

"So you're happy with him."

Though Fleur was not certain she wanted to discuss the exact state of her relationship with Harry—Roger was no more than a casual acquaintance, after all—it was not something she felt she needed ignore either.

"I suppose I am," she replied. "He's a good person—any girl would be lucky, I think."

"Well, I wish you the best," Roger said with what Fleur felt was a little forced jocularity. He stood and smiled. "Hopefully you can train him—he often appears at sea with you." Roger then laughed. "Most of the time he doesn't even look like he understands that he's engaged to you. He only holds your hand, and even then he looks like he doesn't know what to do with it. In fact, he seems to be much more comfortable with that Granger girl than anyone else."

Roger smiled at her a final time and started walking up the street, Fleur looking on with some asperity. Why was he making those comments? It was not as if he actually knew Fleur—or Harry and Hermione for that matter—nor did he know of their relationship.

Fleur was happy with where they were and the direction in which they were going, and trying to force a deeper bond before it developed naturally would not be healthy in her opinion.

"Hi Fleur," Harry's voice interrupted her thoughts. He held out his hand and helped to her feet, and she smiled at him. Harry seemed to be paying much more attention to her today. She knew that he was being influenced by her looks to a certain extent, but Fleur was convinced the deeper feelings would follow in time. She just had to be patient.

"Was that Roger?" he asked.

"It was," said Fleur. "He talks to be me every so often."

Harry smiled at her before leading her down the street toward the Three Broomsticks where they were supposed to meet the rest of the group. As they walked, Fleur chewed over Roger's words, wondering if he should mention them to Harry.

At length she decided not to—Roger had not really said anything out of order, and telling Harry would serve no purpose. Roger might not mean anything by his comments, and Fleur preferred to simply wait and be wary of the other seventh year. Whatever his comments were directed toward, it really did not matter much—she and Harry were fine with their friendship and connection progressing the way it was.

The pub was filled with Hogwarts students when they arrived, but they were immediately waved over to a few tables which had been moved together. The rest of their friends appeared to have been waiting for them only a short time. An order of Butterbeers later and the group of friends were happily engaged in conversation, jokes, and friendly, bantering conversation.

At one point, Ron leaned over and gestured across the pub. "Looks like Malfoy isn't having fun."

Sure enough, across the way sat Malfoy with several other Slytherins. They appeared to be much quieter than the Gryffindor group, and Fleur could see Malfoy glancing from time to time over at their table, generally accompanied by his ever-present sneer. On his other side, Pansy Parkinson was speaking, presumably trying to

gain his attention, but it was evident that she was not having much success the way Malfoy ignored her.

"He's probably just mad that Snape won't let him say anything he wants in Potions any more."

"And how long do you think that will last?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably not as long as it should. But any respite is welcome."

The conversation turned from that point, and soon they were speaking in low voices about the proposed Defense Club. And while Fleur felt that the particulars of the club had been decided upon, the troublesome prospect of where to hold the meetings was still a roadblock.

Some of the group thought Harry to be overly cautious and somewhat bull-headed about his insistence on finding a location where Umbridge could not discover them, but he was adamant. Jean-Sebastian and Dumbledore had impressed upon them the necessity of keeping their heads down and not giving her any reason to attempt to exert more control on the school than she already was, and Harry was determined to do exactly that. Fleur was happy that he was showing some forethought and caution, but on another level the further delay chafed. Something told her that this club and the training they would provide would be needed, and she felt it would be sooner rather than later.

"Harry, have you thought of asking Sirius if he knows a good place for us to meet?" Hermione asked.

"He's seen every location on the map, I would think," Harry replied with a frown.

"I still think it's worth asking him," said Hermione. "He may have some ideas that we haven't considered before."

"I suppose I could always call him on the mirror."

"Well look at what we have here," a grating, cultured drawl interrupted their discussion. "It's Potty's band of Mudbloods, misfits,



and creatures—I really must speak with Madam Rosemerta about letting the riffraff in."

Lazily, Harry put his bottle of butterbeer down on the table, and lazily stared up at Malfoy, while leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "Ferret," he said in response, "those tired insults which always spew from that hole you call a mouth never change, do they? I guess all the inbreeding doesn't allow for any original thought."

Malfoy's nostrils flared, and he glared contemptuously back at Harry. "You'd better watch yourself, Potty. Or perhaps no one has ever taught you how to behave in the presence your betters."

"If I was in the presence of my betters, maybe I would behave," snapped Harry. "Look, Ferret, I'm supposed to be relaxing on my day off, and I'd prefer not to have to take out the trash right now. Can we do this some other time?"

Growling, Malfoy reflexively reached for his wand when a voice stopped him.

"Mr. Malfoy, there will be no fighting in my establishment."

Madam Rosemerta glided into view. "If you cannot leave my other customers alone, I will have to ask you to leave."

With a sneer and a glare, Malfoy stomped from the room, followed by his cronies. Harry looked at the pub owner and raised his bottle in salute, a gesture which she returned with a smile, before she returned to the bar and a group of Hufflepuffs who had just entered.

"Some of you Englishmen just never seem to learn," Fleur observed. It was amazing to her that Malfoy had been placed in the house of the cunning—the boy had not the tiniest iota of subtlety in his entire body. "You would think that he would eventually get the idea that Harry always gets the better of him."

"Hey, don't blame Malfoy on us!" one of the twins protested.

"Malfoy's family originally came from France, you know," the other chimed in.

"Well, why do you think they are no longer in France?" Fleur replied with a saucy grin. "We couldn't stand them there, so we shipped them here."

General laughter met Fleur's statement, and the twins regarded her with some admiration.

"I think we've been had, Gred."

"Indeed, I think you're right, Forge. She's good."

"And don't you forget it," Fleur added with a wink.

That evening after returning from Hogsmeade, Harry retrieved his mirror and went to find an unused classroom with Hermione and Fleur—the common room was not precisely private enough for the conversation Harry wanted have with his godfather, though most of the Gryffindors already knew about the proposed club. Harry almost felt himself becoming paranoid, he mused, as all this cloak and dagger stuff regarding the club was beginning to become somewhat of a habit. Better that than the alternative, he decided—he really did not want Umbridge to find out what they were doing.

Sitting down, he unwrapped the mirror carefully, once again gingerly grasping the precious item with reverence—he was holding an artifact which his father had not only owned, but had a hand in creating. It was a relatively plain hand mirror, devoid of much in the way of decoration, yet containing a marvelous ability to contact someone over great distances.

"Sirius Black," Harry intoned.

They waited for several moments until the mirror suddenly lit up and Sirius appeared.

"Hey, Pup, I'm glad you finally remembered you can contact me on these."

Harry smiled at the words of his happy-go-lucky godfather. He fancied that the man he knew was coming to resemble more closely the boy his father had once known. The treatment he was receiving was working wonders.

"Hi Padfoot. What's up?"

"I think I should be asking you that," replied Sirius with a smirk. "You're the one who called me."

"Ah, I see you have Hermione and Fleur with you. Well done! You're getting to be almost as smooth with the ladies as your old dogfather!"

The predictable rolling of eyes ensued—which, of course, fazed Sirius not in the slightest—and once greetings and the obligatory banter were exchanged, they got down to business.

"We're looking for a place to hold secret meetings, and we were wondering if you knew of anywhere in the castle where we won't be discovered."

Sirius raised an eyebrow, while Hermione and Fleur giggled. "A secret place, is it? I knew you were a fast worker, Harry, but this is amazing."

Blushing, Harry glared into the mirror, prompting his godfather to burst out laughing. "Don't get mad at me—you walked into that one!"

The girls' continued snickers told Harry that he had no support from that end, so he chose the path of least resistance—he ignored their childishness.

"If you could all be serious for a moment—don't say it!" he barked when an even larger smirk appeared on Sirius's face. "We have a problem that we'd like your help with. If you're just going to joke about it, maybe we should call Moony."

"That's fine, Pup," Sirius said with a snicker. "You've got my full attention. You say you need a secure location to hold some meeting. What do you need it for?"

When the three explained what was happening in the school, Sirius sat back for a few moments, apparently in deep thought.

"Umbridge is making a nuisance of herself, is she?" he asked mused out loud. "I can see where you would be worried about your exams. Are you sure she'll last long?"

Though Harry thought the question was somewhat odd, Hermione answered almost immediately. "Dumbledore says that we can't move against her until she gives us a good reason to do so. We just have to assume that she'll be here for the long haul."

"Maybe... I think you won't have to worry about her too much longer—she's the kind of person who cannot help but jam her foot into her mouth repeatedly. But I agree that your idea of a Defense Club is good, for more than just getting around your resident toad.

"Luckily for you I, of the padded foot, do happen to know of a place which will suit your needs," Sirius continued with aplomb. "In our seventh year, James and I discovered a room on the seventh floor which will give you anything you need. We wished we had discovered it earlier, or we would have had far fewer detentions, I can tell you!"

"What do you mean, 'it will give you whatever you need?'" asked Fleur.

"You have to walk in front of the entrance three times, thinking about what you need. The door then appears in the wall and you can go inside. To top it off, whatever you wished for, you will find in the room. So, say you needed a replica of the Gryffindor common room. Walk past the door three times, and presto!—you get a replica of the common room."

The three all shared looks with a common thought—this room that Sirius was telling them about sounded almost exactly like what they needed.

"And where on the seventh floor is this room?"

"It's across from the painting of Barnabus the Barmy. You know—the one with the bloke trying to teach trolls to dance?"

At the blank looks from the teens, Sirius laughed. "Don't worry—you can't miss it. Just go up the grand staircase and down the corridor and you will find it. The painting is... interesting, to say the least. It sticks out like a sore thumb."

"That's great—thanks Sirius," Harry said, echoed by the girls in a chorus.

"No problem, Harry," replied Sirius. "Now don't be using that room tonight for anything I wouldn't do." Sirius then stopped for a moment and contemplated, before a wicked grin once again appeared on his face. "For that matter, don't do some of the things I would do, either."

Rolling his eyes, and wondering if Sirius would ever grow up, Harry thanked Sirius—conveniently ignoring his godfather's admonition—before bidding him farewell and deactivating the mirror.

"Shall we go have a look?" he inquired of his companions, noting the almost identical looks of eagerness on their faces. Their response was for each of them to grab one of his hands and to drag him from the room.

They made their way out into the halls of the school and toward the grand staircase. At one point they saw Umbridge at a distance. The woman did nothing more than to stare at them with a haughty glare before she turned up her nose and stalked off in the opposite direction. Other than that, they made their way toward the seventh floor while meeting relatively few others.

Proceeding down the corridor, they checked the paintings as they walked. When they finally found the right one, Harry reflected that Sirius had been right—it truly was almost impossible to miss.

"Looks like this is the place," Harry said unnecessarily.

"Do you want to do the honors?" Hermione asked.

Shrugging, Harry began pacing in front of the opposite wall, thinking that he needed a place to hold a Defense Club. After his third pass, a tall and ornate door appeared. Exchanging a glance with his companions, Harry approached the door and pulled it open.

Inside was a wide, vaulted space, complete with a dueling platform on the far side of the room, a row of training dummies along the right wall, several bookcases filled neatly with all manner of books, and a podium and several rows of neat chairs along the wall to their left.

They hurried inside while taking care to note that there was no one else in the hallway when they did so. As the door closed behind them, Hermione turned to Harry and Fleur.

"I'd like to test what Sirius told us about the door disappearing."

At Harry's questing glance, she continued, "I'll go back outside and see if the door stays or disappears. Give me about a minute, as I'd like to try to get the door to show up if it does vanish. Then open the door again and let me in."

Harry nodded his acceptance, and Hermione immediately stepped from the room. He waited for a few moments, before the door once again opened and Hermione stepped back into the room.

"Sirius was right!" she exclaimed, though her enthusiasm was blunted slightly. "When I left, the door disappeared, but when I tried to make it appear, it did and I was able to enter."

"Well, what would happen if you tried to make a different room appear?" asked Fleur.

With a contemplative look, Hermione once again stepped from the room. This time Fleur and Harry waited for over a minute before the door once again opened and Hermione entered.

"I can't make another room appear," she informed them. "I tried to get the room to appear as a copy of the Three Broomsticks, but it wouldn't, so I imagined this room again and the door showed up."

"Hmm, that's a bit of a limitation, isn't it?" Harry said with a frown. "I mean, if someone knows we're in here and knows in general what we're doing, they can get in."

The three thought about the problem for a few moments, before Hermione spoke up. "Well, the room gives you whatever you want, right?"

Harry and Fleur nodded.

"Well then, what if you tell it not to allow anyone else? Or maybe you could tell it to not allow specific people, or people with specific intentions?"

Harry grinned and caught Hermione in a one-armed hug—she truly was brilliant.

"I'll do the honors this time," he said. "You guys tell the room that you don't want me to find you, give me about a minute, and then open the door for me again if I don't come in first."

After they readily agreed, Harry stepped out into the corridor again, watching as the door once again vanished behind him. He gave it a few seconds, then began pacing in front of the door, asking for the room that Hermione and Fleur currently occupied. When that did not work, he tried to get the room to appear as a place to hold the Defense Club, but the door stubbornly refused to show itself. He continued to try, right up until the time the door opened.

"It didn't work?" asked Hermione excitedly.

"No. I couldn't get the door to open no matter what I did."

The three looked at each other with wide grins. "Then whoever has the room controls it, and no one can get in unless that person allows it."

"That's perfect!" Harry said.

"I wonder if you can change the room once you're already inside," mused Fleur.

"Well, why don't we try?" asked Hermione. "Harry, you were the one who made the room appear—try getting a fireplace or something to appear as well."

At her words, a fireplace appeared in one of the walls, crackling merrily with what appeared to be a fire already roaring in its grate. The teens approached and quickly verified that it was indeed a real fire, and that the wood appeared to have just started burning. A quick request from Harry and several large pieces of wood were neatly stacked in a pile next to the fireplace. They even tried to determine where the smoke from the fire went, but were unable to get close enough—due to the heat—to figure it out. Hermione postulated that the room transfigured the smoke, or simply vanished it.

However it happened, the trio were quickly able to determine that the room was able to give them just about anything they needed, and that once someone was actually in the room, they could request something—in other words, the person who originally requested the room did not have to be the one to do so.

"I'm guessing, though, we can't get food from the room?" Harry asked.

"Assuming Gamp's law holds, that would seem to make sense," said Fleur.

Hermione nodded her agreement. "Guess there is nothing left to do but to make our final preparations." Harry smiled and directed the two girls from the room. Now that they had a location, there was planning to be done.

The journey back to the common room was uneventful, but Hermione was strangely silent, though Fleur was talkative enough for both girls. They were nearing the access to the common room when Hermione suddenly stopped and peered at Harry.

"What is it, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Umm... Harry..." she stammered, flushing bright red.

Harry regarded her with some amusement—Hermione was generally self-assured, and rarely did she have trouble speaking her mind, especially with him.

"Yes, Hermione?" he asked with an exaggerated "get on with it" motion. As he had intended, Hermione swatted him playfully in response to his teasing.

"I was just wondering," she began, her smile fading away from her face, "you don't think Fleur and I were... pushy about this Defense Club, do you?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at her question. "It's a little bit late to be worrying about that, isn't it?"

Hermione colored once again, and Harry, seeing she was serious, immediately sobered. "Hermione, what brought this on now?"



"It's just that you were so adamant. And then you suddenly gave in..." Hermione trailed off, her voice and demeanor uncertain.

"Hermione's right," Fleur spoke up for the first time. "We've talked about it and agreed that we did not handle the situation very well, especially when you told us repeatedly that you did not want to do it. Instead of pestering you about it, we should have sat down from the beginning and discussed it."

"We just don't want you to think we didn't care about your concerns or that we think we know better than you," Hermione added in a rush.

Deciding it was better to be honest, Harry gazed frankly at Hermione and responded, "I was annoyed with you, Hermione. With you both, actually," he continued, looking at Fleur, who was watching him carefully. "I'm sure that comes as no great shock to either of you."

"But you know me," he continued, once again focusing on his best friend. "I can be just as stubborn as you are. If I really hadn't wanted to do this, I wouldn't have agreed to it, no matter what you said."

Hermione looked relieved. "Thanks, Harry. I just didn't want you to agree just to shut us up."

Chuckling, Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "I know what I said, Hermione, but it was just a joke. I agreed to do it, because you were right, not because I didn't want to hear about it any more."

"Then we should take it as a lesson," Fleur spoke up, reaching out to grasp Harry's free hand. "We must make sure to talk everything out and come to an agreement, rather than allowing our disagreements to turn into arguments."

Harry smiled and squeezed her hand, doing the same with Hermione. The issue now settled, they made their way back to the common room, and their friends.

In the days leading up to the first Defense Club meeting, the trio took all of their friends to the room, showing them its amazing ability to give them anything they needed. Everyone agreed that the room was the perfect place to hold their meetings, and they went into

action, making certain that everyone on the list was extended an invitation

It was Neville who figured out another rather important capability of the room which resolved another issue. The entrance to the room on the seventh floor was in the middle of a wide-open, if generally unused hallway. With the number of potential entrants into the Defense Club, there was a real chance of someone noticing students disappearing on the seventh floor and not reappearing for some time later, especially since some of those students—specifically Harry and those close to him—were under such close scrutiny, particularly from the resident toad. The best plan with which they had been able to devise was to have the students head up to the room in staggered groups, so as to minimize the image of a large gathering.

Neville's idea resolved this problem rather neatly. Upon seeing the room and the amazing things it was able to provide, Neville suggested that perhaps it may also be able to provide an alternative access to the room. With some experimentation, they discovered that the room could be made to create a passageway to anywhere within the castle. Thus, they were able to make a passage appear in an unused—and more importantly, much less conspicuous—classroom, where the club members would first gather, then use the passageway to arrive in the room in time for the meeting. In fact, with Hermione's suggestion that it would be much better to spread the groups out and have them arrive from close to their own common rooms, they commanded the room to provide three separate entrances from rooms near to the three common rooms of the students involved—Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff—allowing each group to arrive without having to walk through the whole school to do so.

The first club meeting was scheduled for Wednesday night, and each member of the trio was full of anticipation—their planning had spanned some time, and they were glad to finally get under way. Harry was, it was true, feeling a little anxiety due to his continued concern about how he would fare when tasked to lead the club. However, all of the friends were excited as they saw the club as an opportunity to not only put the knowledge that Moody had taught them to the test, but they also considered it a chance to strike a blow against Voldemort and his minions. They would not be in any sort of

a combat situation against them, but the club's very existence and purpose was almost akin to spitting in his eye.

All their machinations finally came to fruition that Wednesday evening, and at promptly seven in the evening Harry stood in the front of the group, considering those who had shown up for the meeting. In addition to the Gryffindor fifth and seventh years—and Katie, who it was sometimes difficult to remember that she was not a seventh year, considering how much time she spent with Angelina and Alicia—Ginny was of course there, as well as the Creevey brothers, and a few others. From Ravenclaw, Luna of course attended, as well as Cho Chang, Marietta Edgecomb, Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Roger Davies, and a few others. Hufflepuff's members included Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, Justin Finch-Fletchley, with their entire seventh year's students attending as well. All in all, it was a good turnout.

Eschewing the lectern, which was far more formal than he wanted the club to be, Harry stood in front of the group and began to speak.

"All right everyone, let's get started."

The chattering between the gathered members quieted and Harry soon found himself as the focus of the room. Glancing to Hermione, who stood at his side, he took courage from her smile and turned to address the group.

"Thank you all for coming. We all know what Defense is like this year, and those of us who have OWLs or NEWTs are concerned that we will not learn enough to take our tests properly at the end of the year. That is why we are meeting today."

"What about Umbridge?" Roger Davies asked. "With her continual talk about how the Ministry doesn't want us casting dangerous spells, we're taking a risk being here at all—won't she shut us down when she hears of your club?"

Smirking, Harry answered, "That's why we intend to keep the existence of this group from her."

"How?" asked Justin.

"Take a look around you," said Harry, gesturing to the room. "All of you were lead here through a passageway from locations near your common rooms, but can any of you say where we are?"

A low murmur ran through the assembled, as many took a quick look around the room. It was obvious that the question of just where they were had been on the mind of many.

"This is a wondrous room which will give us anything we want or need, and Umbridge will not be able to find us here. She won't even be able to follow you through the passages."

Several quizzical looks appeared at Harry's declaration, but it was Padma Patil who voiced the obvious question. "What do you mean, Harry?"

"After you enter your passage and close the door behind you, the door simply will not open for anyone trying to follow you. In fact, if you all look at the wall you came in through, can you even see the door you came through?"

The surprise of the group was evident, as none of them had noticed that doors were indeed missing. Harry smiled at the group and decided that a further demonstration was required.

"Basically, this room will give you almost anything you want. For example, I need a long table in the middle of the room."

The murmuring reached much louder levels when the requested table suddenly appeared exactly where Harry had intended. What ensued was a basic information session on the room's capabilities, and why they felt that they were safe from Umbridge's interference, as long as they were careful. To say that the assembled students were impressed was an understatement.

However, Harry refused to tell anyone where the entrance to the room was for security reasons. For now, if the club could only enter through the passages they requested from the room, no one in the room could divulge—intentionally or accidentally—the location of the room.

Once the practical demonstration and explanation was complete, Harry began to speak of the club again. "Now, we've spoken of the

room and the fact that Defense is well below required standards this year. However, the other—potentially more important—reason for this club is to teach us all how to protect ourselves against the Death Eaters."

The room was silent for a moment at Harry's pronouncement, and though Harry knew that no one in attendance was openly aligned with Voldemort, it did not take a genius to recognize that there was some skepticism over what had happened at the end of last year. However, the skeptics appeared as though they did not want to be the first one to comment about the alleged return of the dark wizard.

"Perhaps we should talk about what happened last year," said Harry after a few moments of silence.

"I'm not sure you need to talk about that, Harry," said Hermione.

Harry shook his head. "It's a legitimate concern, Hermione. There's been so much said in the Prophet and by the Minister and others, and I understand that there is a lot of confusion over what happened the night of the third task."

At the general murmur of agreement, Harry whipped out his wand and said, "I, Harry Potter, hereby swear on my magic that everything I have said about the night of the third task and the return of Voldemort is true. So mote it be!"

The flash of light sealing the oath mingled with the quick *lumos* he immediately cast, proving the veracity of his statement. Harry gazed out over the group, trying to catch each set of eyes with his own.

"I have told the truth. Cedric was killed by a Death Eater, after which Voldemort was returned to a body through the use of a dark ritual."

An almost collective flinch at the name of the dark wizard caused Harry to scowl. "Oh for heaven's sake—don't be afraid of his name!" he barked. "It's a made up name because the git didn't like the fact that his father was a Muggle. If you can't stomach the name Voldemort," again there were a few gasps and winces at the name, "then at least call him Tom, as that is his real name."

The silence in the room was almost comical, and mostly induced by the knowledge that Harry actually claimed to know Voldemort's true identity, not to mention his open disdain for the man.

"You know who he was?" a shocked Roger Davies finally managed.

Holding his wand in front of him, Harry wrote out the name "Tom Marvolo Riddle" in the air, much the same as the apparition of the dark lord had done more than two years previous. He then flicked his wand and the words reformed themselves to spell "I am Lord Voldemort."

"The wanker that everyone is afraid of is actually a Half-blood," said Harry, watching the reactions of the audience. Needless to say, most were completely riveted by the story of the most feared wizard of the century. "He was born of a Pureblood witch and a Muggle who was ensnared by a love potion. His father left when his mother stopped giving him love potions, and his mother died soon after giving birth to him, leaving him in an orphanage. He was bullied in that orphanage and responded by becoming the bully. That is who the entire wizarding world has been afraid of all these years."

Harry watched as the assembled club members digested the information he had just imparted, smiling grimly. It was about time that the legend of Lord Voldemort be destroyed and replaced with nothing more than the simple truth, and these students would be the vanguard in spreading that truth. Harry just hoped that he was present when Malfoy first heard of it—he did not doubt that the arrogant git would cry and scream over the "lies" being told about his master. It would be rather amusing to watch.

"So, are you trying to say that this... Riddle guy is a charlatan?" demanded Anthony Goldstein. "Seems to me you are dismissing him rather lightly."

"I am not saying that at all," denied Harry. "Voldemort was and is a powerful wizard—there is no denying that fact. All I would like you to remember is that he is a man, and nothing more. Being afraid to say his made-up name is just silly."

"I agree with Harry," Neville spoke up in what Harry thought was a more confident voice than he had ever heard from the young man before. He watched Neville carefully and noted that he was almost

visibly working up his courage. "Not being able to say Voldemort," he spoke the word very credibly with only a hint of a tremor, "only adds to his mystique. We need to take that weapon away from him and make him more human, rather than the demon that most consider him to be."

A soft rumble of agreement passed through the group, and this time Harry knew that he had scored a significant point.

"Now, about the club," Harry continued when the talking began to die down. "We've told you that we're planning this to help us in our upcoming tests, as it's obvious that Umbridge's class is less than useless. The Ministry is purposely holding us back, because Fudge won't admit that Voldemort is back. If we don't do something about it, we run the risk of doing poorly on our Defense OWLs and NEWTs."

A glare from one of the Ravenclaws caught his attention, and Harry gestured for her to speak.

"You think the Ministry is intentionally keeping us from learning?" she demanded. "What rubbish are you speaking?"

A quick glance around the room showed a wide range of expressions, ranging from disbelief to skepticism to absolute disgust. But though Harry's thoughts mirrored the disgust he saw on the faces of most of the Gryffindors, he forced his feelings down and regarded the girl placidly. He was saved, however, from responding by the voice of his newly betrothed.

"I'm sorry, I don't believe I know you..."

"Marietta Edgecomb," the girl said.

"Marietta," replied Fleur, her voice hard, "you cannot possibly think Minister Fudge has our best interests at heart. He has slandered Harry and Headmaster Dumbledore any way he can, and has not even taken the trouble to investigate Harry's claims. Does that sound like a benevolent protector to you?"

Marietta flushed, but the majority of the room was nodding along with Fleur's statements, so she simply shook her head.

"The fact of the matter is that Umbridge is not going to teach us anything, and I suspect that is by design and on orders from the Minister. Whether anyone else at the Ministry is in on this we don't know. What we do know is that we have to fend for ourselves if we are to learn anything this term."

That seemed to mollify Marietta. She acknowledged her agreement—albeit in somewhat of a grudging manner—and the meeting continued with Harry once again taking up the narrative.

"Okay then, we all know what's happening and what we want to accomplish. Let's talk specifics of what we are planning."

Harry then proceeded to relate what the group had done over the summer and the instruction they had received from Moody. He went on to say that they had several books which truly taught sixth year Defense, and that they would be pulling spells from those books, trying to pay specific attention to the spells they knew would be on their OWL and NEWT exams.

"Right," he said at last, once the explanations were complete. "Now, we all know we need to keep this from Umbridge. Hermione will explain how the membership in the club works."

Hermione reached to a table by her side and showed the group a piece of parchment. "Everyone who wants to be a member of the club will be required to sign this parchment. By signing, you will agree that you will not betray our secrets to Umbridge, or to anyone who is not a member of the club."

"And what if someone breaks that promise?" asked Michael Corner.

"Let's just say the results would be... unpleasant, not to mention quite long lasting."

Wide eyes and shifting feet met Hermione's declaration, and Harry could see that there were several students who seemed to be a little nervous about signing the parchment.

"Look everyone, there is really nothing to it. We want to learn, but we need to keep it from Umbridge so that she won't have any ammunition to use against us. If anyone has any problem with me or



what I've said of Voldemort's return, you are more than welcome to leave."

Though there were still several apprehensive and concerned faces, no one took him up on his offer. He glanced back at Fleur and Hermione and nodded.

"All right then, let's do this."

A/N:

1. My apologies for the delay in posting. Things have been pretty insane, and I was actually on the verge of skipping a week altogether. In some ways I'm not sure if I've polished the chapter the way I had wanted, but I think it was time to post it.

2. The conversation initiated by Hermione regarding Harry's agreement to run the club was in part sparked by many comments I received last week. I was rather surprised at all the commentary, and I think it was about the most polarizing chapter I've ever posted, as half of you seemed to think Hermione and Fleur bullied Harry into leading the club, and that Harry was a wimp to give in. I had actually expected to hear more about how Harry went off on Hermione or his stubbornness, than their behavior. The episode was intended to be a situation where the girls persuaded him to their way of thinking, but also an illustration of how Harry's relationship with Hermione is not perfect. The conversation in this chapter is intended to clear that up.

3. We're starting to get to the point where Harry and Fleur are comfortable with one another, and I hope this chapter shows that for all of you who felt the relationship was too slow. In real time they have known they are betrothed for three months and have had a little time to let the idea sink in and to get to know one another. I've said it many times to many of you—I didn't want the relationships to suddenly turn into "true love" when they still essentially didn't know one another. They still have a ways to go, but they are making progress.

4. Ron is growing. Some Ron haters may still feel that he is making progress far too quickly, but he has been forced into it to a certain extent by the things which have happened. I never meant for his behavior to be a major side plot of this work.

5. Whoever nominated me for the Energize WIP awards: thank you. It was completely unexpected. Fanfiction authors only receive recognition for our efforts in the reviews from our readers. That little bit of extra recognition was appreciated and very welcome. If you would like to know more about the awards go to Noreia NC Charly's author page—it's the link to Charly's homepage. And thanks to Charly for running the awards!

## Chapter 19 – Detention

The rest of October passed in a quiet manner. And though perhaps life at Hogwarts was never dull, nothing major happened until the month had almost turned to November. Hermione continued to watch Harry, noting the changes in her friend and the new sense of determination and application to not only his studies, but also simply the way he gave his all to everything with which he was involved. The old Harry had a tendency to slack off at times—the new Harry was much, much different. Hermione was pleased with the changed, knowing that much of what happened focused on him, and that much would also depend upon him. In this she was joined by Fleur, as it seemed the French witch had become almost as protective of Harry as was Hermione herself.

Harry continued his progress in all of his classes, improving in almost all facets of his education. His level of dedication to his studies had improved significantly, and he was showing an intelligence that Hermione had often glimpsed before, but had never truly been able to see clearly. His explanation, once he had been induced to share, had caught Hermione somewhat off guard.

"The Dursleys never cared," he said with a shrug when asked.

The confusion must have been evident on Hermione's face, because Harry sighed and elaborated on his statement. "The first time I received my grades in primary school, I took them home to my aunt, thinking that I might finally get some acceptance from them—I was proud because I had received very good marks. Other than Aunt Petunia sniffing and saying that I must have cheated to get them, they were completely ignored. Uncle Vernon only grunted and signed them so I could take them back to school. They never scheduled any interviews with the teachers, nor even responded when a meeting was requested."

"So you didn't try?" asked Hermione sympathetically. Though a part of her was horrified at the thought that anyone would not try in school—especially someone as obviously intelligent as Harry—another part of her understood that it was another byproduct of his unhappy upbringing.

"Didn't seem like there was any point," said Harry with a shrug. "I always understood the material, but I didn't make any effort to do

any more—much the same as I have been since I came to Hogwarts. There was no motivation to be anything other than mediocre, so I didn't bother."

"Oh Harry," said Hermione, flinging her arms around him. "So the Delacours helped change that?"

Harry returned her embrace for a moment, before he drew back, appearing pensive. "Well, partially maybe. I also realized that my attitude was silly and that I was only hurting myself by coasting through school. Especially with Voldemort after me."

The conversation helped Hermione understand Harry better than she ever had in the past, and though she regretted his previous lack of effort, she was encouraged by how well he was doing now. His new studious manner was even helping some of his friends, particularly Neville and Ron, who had never been exactly scholarly themselves. There were even times when Ron—Mr. Slacker himself—was found to already be engrossed in an assignment when Hermione sat down to her nightly studying sessions. She supposed it was only fair—Ron had influenced Harry early in their time at Hogwarts, now Harry was returning the favor.

Potions particularly saw a change in not only Harry's attitude, but also his performance, though to be fair, that was also due in part to the improvement of Professor Snape's attitude toward him. It was still evident that the Professor did not like him—Hermione suspected Snape would hold a grudge toward Harry until his dying day—but at least he was for the most part controlled and professional in class. Anything at all was an improvement, and Hermione could only hope that it would last.

The first true training session of the Defense Club went well, with Harry largely going over most of the curriculum from their previous year, as well as mixing in some of the spells that they had learned in previous years. The reason for this was twofold—first to allow everyone to once again get into the mindset and practice of actually casting defense spells, and also to rate the power and knowledge of the members of the club.

The biggest problem that they experienced, however, was the problem of the disparate levels of competence and age existing in the club. Harry was a fifth year, as were many others in the club,

while Fleur and her friends represented the higher levels of training as seventh years. However, there were also several students from younger years, including Ginny, Luna and Colin Creevey as fourth years, while Dennis Creevey was, of course, only a second year. It was tricky trying to design a course which would not only benefit everyone, but also refrain from overwhelming those who were at a disadvantage due to their younger age.

As a result, while they had planned to cover many spells which were taught in the higher years of Defense class, they also had planned to cover many spells which were not taught at all in Hogwarts. Some of these were spells which Moody had taught them, while others were gleaned from books recommended either by Moody or Sirius. And of course they planned to teach some dueling theory, in addition to the more underhanded fighting styles which Moody had run them through that summer.

Malfoy continued to be a bother, as was his wont, but whereas he had largely focused on Harry in the past—Harry's friends had always been caught in his taunting largely by association—ever since the howler incident he seemed to focus more of his vitriol on Hermione, whether Harry was present or not. Of course Hermione just ignored him, knowing the petty boy's opinions were absolutely worthless. In fact, she even smugly alluded to the number of times she or Harry had chased him away in shame, including—with no small amount of glee—the time she had punched him in third year. He was not to be deterred, however, and though Harry continued to hold in his temper, Hermione could tell that Malfoy's taunts, or more specifically those directed at either Fleur or Hermione were wearing on him.

Another situation which appeared to be grating on his nerves was the continual baiting to which he was subjected in Defense class. Umbridge was almost never overt—she appeared to have acquired a modicum of subtlety, or perhaps deviousness—but her snide comments and veiled innuendos were obvious to anyone who cared to hear, though she was careful to keep her comments to the times when she could not be observed by any of the other professors. Generally this meant that she confined her taunts to the classroom, or the corridors when she was certain they were alone.

Regardless of Umbridge's behavior, however, they had avoided approaching Dumbledore about the matter. Not only did they know

that he was aware of the situation, but they had already exchanged thoughts and plans for how to deal with her. Dumbledore was actively seeking a way to remove her from her position, but they were well aware that he felt they needed something concrete and unassailable, or they invited Fudge's further interference in the school.

Through it all, Hermione was proud of Harry—he suffered all of her barbs in silence, ignoring her as much as possible and answering with bland comments when he could do nothing else. The woman started out by attacking his character, his insistence that Voldemort had returned, and when that failed to provoke a response, she moved on to comments about his betrothed and his closest friend.

However, in the last week of October she began to move toward more insidious comments about his parents and his godfather particularly, all delivered in her sickeningly sweet and falsely angelic voice. Harry continued to remain stoic in the face of her words, though Hermione, as one who possessed five years of intimate knowledge of his character and personality, could tell that the edge of his temper was fraying. The walk to Defense class two times a week had almost become a ritual of Harry psyching himself up for the inevitable barrage of the toad woman's snide commentary.

When Harry's temper finally snapped, Hermione understood that it had only been a matter of time, unfortunately. Harry had improved his command of his temper significantly, but even the most even-tempered person could take only so much abuse. The final snapping of his patience had been spectacular, and would have been immensely satisfying, if it had not been so serious.

It happened as Defense class was nearing an end. Umbridge was expounding—somewhat ineffectually, as was her wont—on the merits and limitations of various shielding spells. (Privately, having heard Auror Moody speak on the same subject, Hermione knew that Umbridge was mistaken in a few of the things she explained, but she decided it was not worth mentioning. She would, however, talk with Harry and make certain to address the subject in the next meeting of the Defense Club.)

"Very well class, I believe you are now very well educated in the subject of shield charms," Umbridge concluded, speaking in the self-

congratulatory manner which indicated that she at least felt she was an effective teacher. "What about the Unforgivable Curses?"

Blank looks met her seeming non-sequitur. She huffed slightly, before explaining herself. "Can a shield charm block an Unforgivable?"

Silence met her question, as was common in her class—no one really wanted to speak up in her class, not only not wishing to draw attention to themselves, but also because her class was so boring, minds tended to wander frequently. At length, Dean Thomas raised his hand.

"It is well known that no shield is capable of stopping an Unforgivable," he said, once she had indicated her permission to speak.

"Very good, Mr. Thomas," she praised. "That is correct—no one has ever been able to develop a shield which will stop an Unforgivable Curse. So what do you do if someone casts one of those curses at you?"

Remembering how much more effective Mad Eye had been, Hermione put her hand into the air, speaking when Umbridge called on her. "The best defense against an Unforgivable is to not be there when it arrives," she said, mimicking Harry's answer from the summer.

"Are you suggesting that you dodge?"

"Yes," Hermione affirmed. "It is possible to levitate something in the path of the curse, and battle Transfiguration is always a possibility, but that takes a lot of skill and the timing can be very tricky."

To her side, Harry put up his hand, though the slightly mischievous expression on his face caused alarm bells to go off in Hermione's head.

When Umbridge motioned for Harry to speak, he did so in such a guileless and innocent tone, that Hermione, who knew him very well after all, almost broke out into a fit of giggles.

"But Professor Umbridge, didn't you tell us in our first class that we are safe? How can we be safe if people are casting Unforgivables at us?"

Though Umbridge was obviously vexed by his question, she could not find a way to attack him or refute his words which, though perhaps contained a slight air of insolence, were nothing but the absolute truth.

"I believe we are speaking hypothetically, Mr. Potter," was her prim reply.

"Well, in that case, speaking hypothetically," Harry emphasized the word, "given your other comments during our first class, I suspect that if someone casts an Unforgivable at us, then we should wait for the Aurors to show up and take care of the matter. Is that not correct?"

Umbridge's eyes were afire, such that they would be burning holes in Harry had she the power to do so. A quick glance at Harry told Hermione that he had not lost the poker face he had almost perfected for the class. Again, Hermione, who knew him better than anyone, could instantly tell that he was enjoying baiting the professor for once as payback for the many times where she had baited him.

Of course, that was where it all fell apart.

"If I recall correctly, Mr. Potter, you have a considerable amount of experience with the Unforgivable Curses."

"If you count getting hit by them experience, then I suppose that I am an expert," said Harry in a dry tone of voice.

"Yes, the Boy-Who-Lived and all of that."

"Indeed," Harry agreed. "I do have a complete set of them, but I really don't like to talk about it very much."

"Really, Mr. Potter." Now the woman was feigning ignorance. "I know about your Defense Professor from last year and his demonstration of the Imperius curse, but I was unaware that you have ever been the recipient of the Cruciatus."



Harry stared nonchalantly back at the woman. "As I have stated, my experiences with the Unforgivables are well documented, Professor. I would prefer not to discuss them any further."

"Of course," she soothed in her breathy voice. "But tell me, Mr. Potter—do you have as much experience casting the Unforgivable Curses, as you have being hit by them?"

At once Harry's face became stony. "I am not certain what you are suggesting, Professor."

"You are the only one who survived your little adventure last year, are you not? You claim you were whisked away along with that... that... other boy..."

"Cedric Diggory," Harry snarled, his voice now less than friendly.

"Yes of course!" Umbridge exclaimed, as though his words had jogged her memory. "The Diggory boy. Such a shame—my colleague Amos was devastated when his son was returned to him at the end of the tournament as a corpse. So sad."

"Cedric Diggory was a loyal and true companion, Professor," said Harry between clenched teeth. "I suggest you speak of him with a little more respect."

"Oh, I have all the respect in the world for the Diggorys, Mr. Potter, I assure you. It is strange though, don't you think? The two of you supposedly leave Hogwarts grounds, but only one of you return alive."

By now, Harry was only holding on to his temper by the barest of margins, and even Hermione's hand on his shoulder was only calming him so much. Hermione tried desperately to think of some way to change the conversation, to interrupt the confrontation which was speeding forward inexorably like a freight train, but the words were being spoken at a furious pace, and the rest of the room appeared almost spellbound by the exchange. Helplessly, Hermione watched as Harry once again gritted his teeth and responded to the Professor.

"Yes, it is unfortunate that Cedric was murdered by a betrayer long thought to be dead—that much is not in question. Just what are you trying to insinuate, Professor?"

"Oh nothing, I assure you," said Umbridge. She appeared to be discussing no more than the latest fashions or the weather, given her continued simpering voice and angelic smile. "I merely feel that it is quite convenient that the only witness to young Cedric's death is a known liar. Tell me—was the Prior Incantato ever cast upon your wand that night?"

"Are you suggesting—"

"Of course not, Mr. Potter," Umbridge interrupted. "I was merely curious as to what you did to... defend yourself during your tribulations. It must be difficult indeed to know that you are cursed in such a manner."

"What do you mean?" was Harry's flat response. He was not mollified in the slightest that Umbridge had backpedalled on accusing him for Cedric's death.

"Why, that people around you seem to die frequently." She began ticking off her fingers. "There were your parents, of course, and then Professor Quirrel seemed to die quite mysteriously in your first year. And then of course last year it was Cedric Diggory. It appears that you have quite a body count to your name."

"You stupid cow!" Harry bit out, his voice as cold as ice. "My parents were murdered by a foul madman, and you are not fit to even speak their names, let alone refer to them in any manner! He possessed Professor Quirrel in my first year, and died when he could not stand my mother's protection when he came in contact with me."

"And as for Cedric, he was murdered by the same traitor who betrayed my parents fourteen years ago, during a ceremony which restored his disembodied master to life. If you had even the barest measure of common sense—you and that idiot Minister of yours—you would have immediately put me under Veritaserum to verify my story, and then investigated the matter for yourselves, rather than hiding your heads in the sand like ostriches!"

Far from being offended by Harry's tirade, Umbridge merely smiled at him, never once indicating anything other than gleeful triumph.

"That will be a month's detention with me starting tomorrow after the Halloween feast, Mr. Potter. I knew that you could suppress your troublemaking ways for only so long, and I look forward to showing you the error of your ways."

"Good luck," Harry snarled in response, but Umbridge had already turned away, completely unconcerned.

She finally had him in detention.

It was a slightly chagrined and subdued Harry who trudged through the hallways of Hogwarts with Hermione and Fleur at his side, on his way to the Headmaster's office. The fact that he had had a blowup with Umbridge that afternoon and that she had subsequently assigned him a month of detentions had already made its way through the school like wildfire. Malfoy was even more insufferable than ever, but Harry, for once, found that he could cheerfully ignore the ponce—the git did not have anything to say which was worth hearing.

His friends had been highly supportive, knowing what he had had to put up with in Defense class this year. Hermione and Fleur especially had been nothing but loyal and caring, but to a certain extent Harry could not help but feel that he had let them down.

The gargoyle appeared to have been expecting them, as it moved aside as soon as they approached. Soon they were sitting in the office with the Headmaster as his stern, yet amused eyes regarded them.

"Am I to understand you have had a confrontation with the Defense Professor, Harry?" Dumbledore asked without preamble.

Harry ducked his head, feeling sheepish once again at losing his temper. Another part of him, however, was still incensed at the vile words the woman had spewed at him. He had determined that no one was to be allowed to treat him or his friends in such a manner again, and the thought filled him with a new sense of determination.

Raising his gaze, he forced himself to meet the Headmaster's gaze without flinching. "Yes, I have, Professor. But I don't apologize for it. She had it coming."

Pursing his lips, Dumbledore's gaze appeared to lose focus slightly as though he was considering something. "I daresay she did, Harry," Dumbledore replied after a moment. "In fact, I do not doubt that she has deserved it since long before she arrived at this school. But regardless of whether or not she deserved it, we will now need to handle the situation as it is. I believe that Jean-Sebastian should be involved in this conversation."

He abruptly rose and approached the fireplace. Grabbing a handful of Floo powder, he called the Ambassador's Manor and spoke into the fire for a few moments. He then backed away from the fire, and a few moments later Fleur's father stepped through.

Fleur rose to embrace her father, which he returned affectionately, before Jean-Sebastian turned and greeted the rest of the occupants, shaking Harry's hand and slapping him on the back affectionately. Moments later they were all sitting and discussion of what had happened that afternoon in Defense class began in earnest.

Harry, mindful of his determination that Umbridge would not be allowed to get away with her machinations, held his head high as he recounted the events which had led to their impromptu conference. He desperately wished to lambaste the woman who was single-handedly ruining the school year for him, but he stuck to the facts, realizing that they, by themselves, were enough to completely damn the woman in the eyes of everyone in the room.

When his narrative had come to a close, Harry watched as Jean-Sebastian leaned back in his chair to consider the matter, while Dumbledore's unfocused gaze indicated his own introspection. Once again Harry felt a hint of guilt for succumbing to her taunting and thereby creating this situation. And yet another part of him again quashed it—he had kept his temper for almost two months, in the face of the vile woman's vitriol! She was absolutely reprehensible, and could not be allowed to get away with whatever she wanted.

"Well, Headmaster," said Jean-Sebastian after a moment of silence, "the ball appears to be in your court, as the Muggles would say. Given what has happened with this woman, I believe it is time to

remove her from the school. I am only surprised that she has not been as cruel to Fleur as she has been to Harry."

Dumbledore stroked his beard, apparently deep in thought. "I agree with you, Jean-Sebastian. However, rather than confronting her, I believe a little subtlety may be warranted in this situation."

"What do you mean?" asked Jean-Sebastian.

"It is not in question whether I could physically remove Madam Umbridge from the school—as Headmaster and having control over it and the wards I could banish her easily if I so chose. But we all know what the result of that action would be."

"And how much control over the school does Fudge possess?"

"Not as much as he would like to believe," said Dumbledore with a smile. "He, of course, is the head of the Ministry, and as such over all its departments, including Education. The Department of Magical Education maintains responsibility for the school and that department head would hold the ultimate responsibility. I believe the reason that Cornelius has not yet attempted to have me removed from Hogwarts is due to the fact that I still employ a considerable amount of political power, but also because he and the department head share a mutual animosity. Jonus Berrens has been head of the Department of Magical Education for many years—long before Fudge came to power. He enjoys a high level of popularity and is good at his job, so Fudge has been unable to dismiss him."

"And you believe that the Minister may finally be able to move against this department head, and also you?"

"I am uncertain," said Dumbledore. "He may feel strong enough in his position to do so, or he may simply replace Umbridge with someone else. As I am certain the children already know, Madam Umbridge is not the most... competent individual."

Harry snorted at that statement. "I'm a fifth year, and I'm pretty positive that I could beat her easily in a duel."

"I do not doubt you could, Mr. Potter," replied Dumbledore. "In fact, her performance in the subject when she attended this school was

so abysmal, that it is a wonder she left this institution with an OWL at all.

"However, I was more speaking of her general abilities, and not only those of her position. Simply put, I don't believe that she is the type to think things through, and though she might have a plan going forward, I believe much of what she does is based on spur of the moment impulses and actions which are at best ill thought out. I would not wish to have the Minister remove her and insert someone far more competent or sinister.

"And as for the possibility of removing me—I could potentially fight it in the Wizengamot, and I believe that I would likely succeed. However, the condition of the Wizengamot is currently such that victory is by no means assured. Thus, I would prefer to have some airtight means to remove Umbridge from the school, which would then allow me to bring in someone of my own choice to fill the position."

Jean-Sebastian regarded the Headmaster with some speculation. "What is it that you propose, Headmaster?"

"Simply that we allow Harry to attend this detention with the Defense Professor."

Jean-Sebastian was silent for several moments as he shrewdly eyed the Headmaster. And though Harry himself was somewhat surprised at Dumbledore's words, he knew that the Headmaster would not make such a suggestion without having some other motive as well, especially not after he had already done away with a detention handed out by the woman previously. This was a serious shift in strategy, and for him to suggest such a thing meant that he had a plan in mind.

"Please continue—I must admit I am intrigued."

"We all know that Umbridge wants Harry in detention. But what we don't know is why."

Harry had to agree—they had attempted to foil her plans to have him in detention, but they never really knew why it was so important to her to have him misstep.

"This is an opportunity for us to find out why."

"And what of Umbridge? How far do you think she may go to prove her point, whatever it is?"

"That's just it, Ambassador," said Dumbledore, with a twinkle in his eye, "I do not believe Harry would be in any overt danger. However, I suspect that given her methods thus far—such as detention for speaking in class—she is likely to go further than she ought, which could potentially give us more ammunition to see her removed from the school."

Jean-Sebastian reflected on the matter for several moments before he spoke. "I believe I see your point, Headmaster. Still, I am uneasy about exposing Harry—we are talking about essentially using him as bait."

"With all due respect," Harry spoke up, "I've been in the firing line ever since I arrived at Hogwarts. I hardly think that a pudgy, pink toad is more dangerous than any of the other situations I've faced."

An amused smirk came over Jean-Sebastian's face. "I suppose you have at that, Harry." He turned his attention back to Dumbledore. "What is your plan?"

"We allow Harry to go to the detention with a monitoring charm on him," replied Dumbledore. "You and I will listen in while Harry is in his detention and step in if Umbridge goes too far. Then based on whatever she tries, we can plan out next steps accordingly."

Harry noticed that Jean-Sebastian's eyes never once left Dumbledore's face. He seemed to suspect something which Dumbledore was not speaking of, and Harry wondered what his guardian could possibly be thinking. His conjecture was confirmed by the next words out of the Ambassador's mouth.

"Let us not beat around the bush, Headmaster. What do you suspect?"

Dumbledore sighed before he responded. "I will not lie to you—any of you," he said, casting his glance around to each person in the room in turn. "I firmly believe, given her behavior and the Minister's... displeasure with how the trial proceeded, that Madam

Umbridge will make every attempt to cow you, Harry. Whether she believes that you are also the key to ruining my reputation I am not certain. However, I do not believe that she will merely have you write lines tonight, or anything so benign; I am certain she has something more in mind.

"She may also feel that provoking you to a reaction—which you have finally given her today—is a necessary step in whatever plans she has for this school. Now that she has managed to place you in detention, I believe that we shall see her next move very quickly.

"Finally, I suspect that she anticipates my interference in your detention, and likely has some plan in mind to counter me if I intervene. If I do nothing, she will likely assume that you either did not approach me to appeal, or more likely, she will believe that we feel there is nothing which can be done about this detention. In either case, she will be overconfident, leading her to be less careful than she ought. We can use this against her."

"And if she doesn't do anything to incriminate herself?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "Then at that point we consider the situation again and continue our attempts to remove her through other means. At the very least, if enough students come forward and complain about her class, that, together with her lack of credentials, may be enough to remove her."

"I believe this is your decision, Harry," said Jean-Sebastian at length. "You are the one who will be with the woman, so your opinion is the most important."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude—very rarely in his life had anyone ever asked his opinion. It made the changes of the previous summer seem all the more... real, to be treated more like an adult than an ignorant child.

In truth, however, there was little decision to be made. Harry did not fear the woman, after all—to him she was much more of an irritant and a drag on his ability to learn what he needed than someone to be feared. And if this was their opportunity to rid the school of her, then he was all for it.



"I think we should do it," he said out loud, noting the shared looks of slight trepidation, and pride at his courage from the two young ladies.

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well. I believe that we should place the monitoring charm on you ahead of time so we avoid her suspicion."

"Perhaps we shouldn't meet in your office then, Headmaster," said Hermione.

"An excellent suggestion, Miss Granger. We shall arrange to meet a few hours in advance of the evening meal, which should help throw any spies she has watching you off the trail. I shall set up the charm, and tie it to a dicta quill to obtain a record of every word you exchange with her."

The plan now determined, the group broke up soon after. Jean-Sebastian said his farewells in Dumbledore's office not wishing to be seen at Hogwarts—the less information Umbridge possessed about their plans, the better. If she thought he had been contacted about the situation, she may be a trifle more circumspect the following day. And though Harry knew that he was the one she was targeting, he wanted the woman gone, and was willing to endure much to see it happen.

The three friends soon left the office and made their way down toward the Great Hall, speaking quietly amongst themselves. Hermione and Fleur had both expressed their intention of being near the Defense office the following evening to be available should they be needed, but also to show their support for him. Harry suspected their protectiveness was for nothing—he doubted the toad woman would try anything overt—but their care and concern was warmly accepted and appreciated by the young man.

They were soon to find out that Dumbledore had been completely correct about his assumption that Umbridge would soon make her next move. Upon reaching the entrance to the great hall, they found a number of students looking at the Educational Decrees, which had grown in number since they had first been enacted. Among the students stood both Ron and Neville, both of whom motioned the trio to join them as soon as they noticed their approach.

"What's going on, Ron?" Harry asked as he walked up with Hermione and Fleur by his side.

Ron said nothing, instead pointing at a new case hanging prominently to the right of the entrance. Inside the case was a new educational decree which read as follows:

#### Educational Decree No. 23

Delores Jane Umbridge has been appointed to the post of Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

The friends exchanged glances after reading the decree, but Harry shook his head at the group, motioning them to the Great Hall's entrance and the relative security the noise would provide.

In silence the group sat next to those their friends who were already there, including Luna—she had been eating most of her meals at the Gryffindor table. They served themselves from the heaping platters, as the conversation began in earnest.

"Harry, we heard you got detention today," said one of the twins.

"It was pretty spectacular," said Neville with a grin. "He didn't say anything I haven't wanted to say for the past two months."

"So did you talk to Dumbledore?" asked the second twin.

Harry glanced up at the head table, noting the smug grin on the insufferable Umbridge's face as she beamed down at him. Just managing to avoid rolling his eyes at the woman, Harry covered his response by raising his fork to his mouth.

"It's handled. That's all I'm going to say."

Most of the group nodded and accepted the answer with no comment. Harry was relieved that they had allowed the matter to drop—it was likely better that he kept the plan to himself, but regardless, the Great Hall, under the watchful eye of the toad woman, was no place to divulge it to his friends.

"What is a 'High Inquisitor'?" Fleur asked.

Hermione glanced at her worriedly. "I'm not sure, but if Umbridge was appointed to it, it can't be good for us."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the group, and most of the conversation ceased as they all attended to their meals.

As it turned out, they were to find out exactly what a High Inquisitor was the following day. As it was a Tuesday, the fifth years started off with Charms in the morning, followed by Transfiguration. The students had largely settled into their seats in the Transfiguration classroom when Umbridge entered the room, her perpetual silly smile affixed to her face.

Professor McGonagall frowned at this unexpected intrusion into her classroom. "Professor Umbridge, as you can see I am teaching a class now. Whatever you are here concerning, it can wait until class is over."

"You mistake my presence, Deputy Headmistress," Umbridge responded in her girlish voice. "I am here merely to observe, so you may continue your class as you normally would."

McGonagall's expression became even more severe. "Observe? Whatever for?"

The toad woman's simpering smile became even wider. "Perhaps you have not read the most recent Educational decree, but I have been made the High Inquisitor over this school."

"I did read it." McGonagall's impatience was truly beginning to show. "What of it? I think most of the school does not even know what the position is, let alone what it means."

"Why Professor," the girly woman laughed, "do you not remember my words at the opening feast? The standards of this school have sadly dropped, and it is my job to once again make it the glorious institution it once was."

"I had intended to simply observe and implement any suggestions slowly, but my observations, not to mention recent events," she smirked at Harry, "have dictated a more active approach. Everything must be inspected and either improved or rejected, and that includes anything from the curriculum to the professors."

If looks could kill, Harry was certain that by this time, Umbridge would be a pink puddle oozing over the floor. However, the Transfiguration Professor merely sniffed with some disdain before responding. "Very well, but if you must be in my class, you will sit quietly and not interrupt."

"I have no intention of interrupting, my dear Minerva," said Umbridge affably. "However, I would suggest you modify your tone and choice of words before your superior."

McGonagall's eyebrow rose at this statement, but she did not deign to respond to the woman's assertion. It appeared that Umbridge thought she had won the point, based on the smugness which returned to her features after the Professor turned away. For those who knew the Transfiguration Professor, however, it was obvious that she had simply dismissed Umbridge as not being worth her time and energy.

"I guess we know now what a High Inquisitor is," Hermione whispered to Harry.

Harry merely nodded, but the brief exchange did not escape Umbridge's notice.

"I see you have the same set of whisperers in your class as I have in mine," she said brightly.

Professor McGonagall turned and regarded Umbridge with an unreadable expression on her face, which was returned by the pink-clad woman. "I believe they should be punished—discipline is paramount, as you know."

Though McGonagall appeared as though she would prefer just about anything else, she turned to Harry and Hermione. "That will be two points each from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger. In the future, please be certain to raise your hand if you have something to say."

The renewed smug expression on Umbridge's face disappeared over the course of the class, as on several separate occasions, McGonagall found reasons to award both Harry and Hermione for correctly answered questions, and for being the first to correctly manage their transfigurations for the day. In all, by the time the class

period had ended, their two point losses had been more than wiped away by the ten points each of them had earned, leaving Harry feeling somewhat self-satisfied at the failure of the woman's machinations. He could not resist a smile at her as she gathered her paraphernalia and breezed out of the classroom with her nose held high.

Late that afternoon, Harry met the Headmaster in an unused classroom after his last class to allow the placement of the monitoring charm. The Halloween feast was much as it was in previous years, with Harry feeling a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the wizarding celebration. This was, after all, the anniversary of his parents' deaths, and it was not a day of celebration in his opinion. His friends were solicitous and kind, giving him their sympathies and support, but largely allowing him to eat his meal in silence. Unfortunately, it seemed to be a yearly tradition in his life—something always happened on Halloween.

Umbridge's bright, cheery voice bid him enter as soon as he had arrived after the feast, and he stepped into the classroom, noting the gleeful expression of self-righteous smugness which adorned the Defense Professor's face. He longed to knock it from her in a rather permanent manner. Schooling himself to patience, he did nothing more than approach her desk and wait for her to speak.

She did not speak for several moments, seemingly content to watch him, perhaps hoping he would squirm at the scrutiny. Harry, however, was not in the mood to indulge her; he merely stood patiently and waited for her to break the silence.

"Do you know why you are here, Mr. Potter?" she asked at length.

Because you are an ignorant cow, he thought viciously.

"Presumably because I spoke out in class?" he said out loud.

"That is only a small measure of your transgressions, Mr. Potter. Yes you spoke out in class when you should have held your tongue, but though you have controlled yourself to a certain extent since I have arrived in this school, I have witnessed several times where you almost burst out in a most improper manner."

Due to your constant baiting. Regardless of his thoughts, Harry kept his countenance, knowing that losing his temper here would not help his case at all. The woman was a known quantity and her behavior had been atrocious—he would do everything in his power to ensure her timely and irrevocable departure from the castle.

She continued after a moment, her expression clearly showing the fact that she had expected Harry to respond and was disappointed when he did not. "Beyond your more obvious faults, there is the matter of your insistence in stating that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned. The Ministry cannot countenance your continued attempts to sow discord and fear in stating such an impossibility. You-Know-Who has been gone these past fourteen years, and shall not return. What do you say to that?"

"I've already said everything I am going to say," responded Harry. "The fact that you refuse to believe, or that you won't even make use of the magical tools available to verify the truth, does not change anything."

"Your arrogance apparently knows no bounds, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled thinly at her. "A certain potions master of my acquaintance is constantly making that claim—I give your opinion no more credence than I do his."

"Perhaps Professor Snape sees more clearly than most."

"Or perhaps he's just a greasy git who holds a grudge against my father," retorted Harry.

Umbridge peered at him through narrowed eyes. "You seem to think that the world owes you something, Mr. Potter, and that you are somehow above the rules set down for us all. My aim is to show you that you are not as great and untouchable as you like to think. For the good of our people, your constant lies must be stopped."

"You cannot punish me for stating my beliefs," said Harry.

"I can punish you for anything I want," snapped Umbridge. "I am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic himself! I am also the High Inquisitor for this school! Your precious Headmaster cannot

stop me, nor can anyone else, as I have the full backing of the Ministry in this matter."

Harry did not deign to point out that not everyone at the Ministry was as blind and stupid as she and Fudge had proven themselves to be. He felt that by this time he had antagonized her enough that if she was not already planning something which was beyond what she could get away with, perhaps he had provoked her into it. As such, he merely sneered in her direction.

"Well then, what punishment would have for me?"

A feral smile lit up her face. "You shall write lines, Mr. Potter."

"Lines?" asked Harry with a raised brow. "Is that all?"

"Oh, I don't think you will act so glibly when I am finished with you. You shall write 'I must not tell lies' for the rest of the evening while you are with me. Perhaps repeating it several hundred times will imprint it into your memory."

Throwing her a look reserved for the petty—or the stupid—Harry sat down at a nearby desk and began rummaging through his pack for the required tools.

"Close your bag, Mr. Potter—you will not need anything there."

"Do you intend me to write lines with my finger?" snarked Harry.

"That will be another two weeks detention added to your punishment, Mr. Potter. Any further outbursts will result in even more punishment being levied out. At this rate, you may be in detention with me every night until Easter."

"As if," Harry grumbled under his breath.

Umbridge, however, took no notice. "You will use one of my... special quills for this detention.

"Should I retrieve some ink from my pack, Professor?"

A gleam entered her eye and her smile became even more unpleasant. "Oh, I think you will find that you do not need any ink. Just begin to write with that quill—I will accept no more delays."

Her gleeful expression told Harry that there was something he could not see—or perhaps did not know—which was at play here. The woman had just announced that he was to use a quill without ink, after all, and had he not known of her sadistic streak, he would have thought that she was barmy at the very least. There was something else going on here, but whatever it was he had no time to ponder it.

"Remember, 'I must not tell likes' will be your phrase for this evening."

"How about 'I must not tell the truth?'" asked Harry. "That's what this situation is, you know."

"Two more weeks detention!" Umbridge squealed. "I will break you of this pathological need to lie, Potter, if it's the last thing I do!"

Again, Harry forced himself not to point out that attempting "break" a child was hardly proper behavior for any adult, especially one in a position of authority at a school. Umbridge, he doubted, knew anything of modern child protection laws or practices, nor would she care if she did know.

Shaking his head, Harry grasped the quill in his hand and began to write, noting with some surprise the words which appeared on the page in bright red ink. It was so unexpected that the sharp pain in his hand took him completely by surprise, and by the time he registered it, the pain had receded. He glanced at the back of his hand and rubbed it, wondering where it had come from. Seeing no mark there, he glanced up at Umbridge, noting the wide smirk of triumph etched upon her features.

Scowling, Harry turned his attention back to the paper, knowing that something was up. He took greater care in writing this time, watching the back of his hand for the source of the pain. Upon finishing the sentence, a perfect replica of his spidery script appeared on the back of his hand, accompanied by the sharp pain from early. It glowed red for a brief moment before once again fading, leaving his hand unblemished.



"What the hell is this?" Harry demanded, rising to his feet belligerently.

"I told you, it is one of my special quills," Umbridge cooed. "Now, you may sit down and continue to write your lines."

"I will not!" Harry exclaimed. "I don't know what this is or what you are trying to pull here, but this isn't detention—it's torture. I won't allow you to get away with it!"

"You have no choice little boy!" cried Umbridge. "Another month's detention and a fifty point deduction from Gryffindor! Now sit back down and continue to write before I have you in detention for the rest of your time in Hogwarts!"

Scowling, Harry took his seat and picked up the offensive quill. He wrote the line a few more times, ignoring the pain in his hand as he did so. Each time he wrote, the lines appeared once again on the back of his hand, and by the time he had written the line a dozen more times, a faint pink outline had begun to form on the back of his hand. Gritting his teeth he continued to write, but he did not do so in silence.

"Why are you doing this? Surely the return of a Dark Lord is not a petty matter which can be swept under the rug."

"You are truly amazing Mr. Potter. You have written those lines at least twenty times now, and still you continue to spout these foolish untruths. You-Know-Who is dead and shall not be returning! You must learn this if you are to make anything of your life. Your moment of fame as passed, Mr. Potter—be happy with what you have had."

Harry shook his head. "Your blindness astounds me."

"As your pathetic obtuseness astounds me, Mr. Potter," said Umbridge with a sneer. Harry looked up at her, and he could see the light of fanaticism which lit up her eyes. "You are nothing but a jumped-up Half-blood with delusions of importance."

"There is the bigotry I expect to see from an ignorant bitch like you," Harry snapped. "And while you consider me to be a self-important attention seeker, I know that you are a mediocre bitch with delusions of adequacy!"

Umbridge's nostrils flared and she appeared on the edge of a retort, when the door to the classroom opened and a voice rang out.

"Harry, you will stop writing immediately!"

Jean-Sebastian and Dumbledore had arrived.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who slogged through this chapter. And if you are wondering, yes Umbridge finally getting Harry in detention and getting caught with the blood quill right after the DA got started was completely intentional. I liked the irony of the situation. I'll be interested to hear everyone's commentary, and your guesses on how this will affect Umbridge.

One further note: due to an overall busy season at work and at home, as well as a serious family issue, I've not had nearly as much time to write recently, and that has eaten into my buffer significantly. I will continue to post as long as I have completed chapters, but there may come a time when I simply don't have a buffer left and chapters may be delayed because of it. My apologies, but it really cannot be helped.

## Chapter 20 – The Downfall of Delores Umbridge

"Appoline, I am leaving now," Jean-Sebastian announced to his wife as he leaned down to kiss her cheek.

Though perhaps it would have been expected for his wife to return his gesture of affection with one of her own, Appoline's expression never altered from the severe displeasure which had graced it since the day before. "Jean-Sebastian, you remember to tell that Headmaster that I will not tolerate that... that... cochon to abuse any of our children any longer!"

Suppressing an amused chuckle, Jean-Sebastian leaned down and kissed her again. "Do not worry, my love. I believe that Dumbledore is right—Umbridge is stupid enough to hang herself. All we need to do is to allow her enough rope to do so."

Scowling, Appoline stood and put her hands on her hips. "I do not like this plan of Dumbledore's—Harry does not need to be used as bait after what his relatives put him through. At the first sign of trouble, you get him out from under that woman's thumb!"

"Yes dear," Jean-Sebastian dutifully repeated, before he bent down and kissed his youngest daughter who, though she did not perhaps understand exactly what was occurring, was at least aware that her idol was being threatened. Her expression of displeasure was almost the mirror image of her mother's, and Jean-Sebastian was forced to once again stifle a laugh at the sight.

Trying to spare himself another tongue-lashing, Jean-Sebastian quickly made his way from the sitting room, in which his wife was checking the last of Gabrielle's schoolwork for the day, toward his study, and the Floo which would take him to Hogwarts.

To say that Appoline had been displeased the previous evening when he had returned to the manor with the story of what had happened with Harry was an understatement. And perhaps Umbridge and Fudge did not realize it, but in Appoline they had made an enemy of a witch who was as implacable in her resentments as she was strong-willed. Appoline would not stand for any foolishness, and having had to put up with the stigma of being

labeled a "creature" or "Veela hussy" all her life, she was remarkably intolerant of any kind of bigotry.

She had also come to be very protective of Harry in the brief time he had stayed with them before departing for Hogwarts—she was now as protective of him as she was of her own daughters. The fact that her temper had been simmering on a slow burn ever since reports of the hated woman's behavior had begun reaching them had not done anything to mitigate the explosion in the slightest.

Arriving at his study, Jean-Sebastian stepped in and, after taking a fortifying breath, stepped through the Floo and entered the Headmaster's office. The two men greeted each other and made small talk until the appointed time for Harry to arrive in Umbridge's classroom arrived. Dumbledore produced a small stone and waved his wand, and the two waited for several moments for Harry to arrive in the Defense classroom. All at once they heard a knocking through the stone, to which Umbridge called permission to enter. The conversation continued after that—the game was on.

The pride Jean-Sebastian felt at Harry's response to Umbridge's words, and the way he fearlessly provoked her, was the pride of a father for a son. Harry was truly an exceptional young man and Jean-Sebastian was happy to assume the role of surrogate father in his life.

"Lines?" Jean-Sebastian was puzzled at the woman's statement. Lines were truly an innocuous sort of punishment which was not overly threatening in the slightest.

"Wait, Jean-Sebastian—be patient," Dumbledore cautioned as the confrontation continued.

Jean-Sebastian glanced sidelong at the Headmaster, wondering if he knew something he was not sharing, but Dumbledore paid him no mind, focused as he was on the conversation coming through from the Defense classroom. When Harry made his comment about writing lines with his finger, Jean-Sebastian began to get a rather uneasy sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Surely she cannot mean to..." He trailed off, listening in growing anger as he heard Harry yell at Umbridge. At that point it all became clear.

"Un plume de sang!" he snarled, glaring at Dumbledore. "A blood quill! Has she gone far enough for you now, Headmaster?"

As smile of self-satisfaction appeared on the Headmaster's face. "Indeed, I believe this will be enough to damn her completely, Ambassador. Shall we go and rescue your ward?"

Suspicion once again bloomed in Jean-Sebastian's mind, but he knew that now was not the time to have this conversation. He merely nodded his head shortly before following the Headmaster from his office.

A few short moments later and they had arrived at the Defense classroom. Jean-Sebastian took the lead and without preamble, he wrenched the door to the classroom open, forcing it to crash against the wall as he strode toward Harry and the toad woman.

"Harry, you will stop writing immediately!" he spat as he glared at Umbridge.

Though startled, Umbridge regained her composure immediately. "Ambassador. Headmaster. What are you doing in my classroom?"

"Witnessing you as you make a very big mistake, Madam," Jean-Sebastian snarled.

"Whatever do you mean, Ambassador?" the woman simpered. "I am merely disciplining this miscreant for his actions and words in my classroom. I assure you, it has nothing to do with you, nor does it warrant your interference. You will both leave this room now, or you will lose your position, Headmaster, and you, Ambassador will be removed from your post."

Stalking up to Harry, Jean-Sebastian held out his hand, snapping the blood quill as soon as it was in his possession. Umbridge's nostrils flared and she jumped up from her desk, wand in hand.

"How dare you Ambassador!" she screamed. "That was my own personal property that you just destroyed. I will see you arrested for this!"

"Harry," the Headmaster spoke up. "You will leave the room and return to your common room. As Headmaster of Hogwarts, I hereby declare that your point deduction this evening is reversed, and all your detentions with Madam Umbridge are cancelled."

"Yes, Headmaster," Harry said standing and gathering his bag. Jean-Sebastian was darkly amused to see that Harry favored Umbridge with a smirk before he sauntered from the room, whistling a jaunty tune.

Umbridge's smirk was absolutely feral. "You have just made your final mistake, you old dotard. I will be speaking with the Minister at first light, and I assure you that your tenure here at Hogwarts will end soon after."

"Oh, I believe that you are quite mistaken, Madam," said Dumbledore. His expression was implacable, and none of his habitual grandfatherly mien was detectable. Here stood the man who had defeated Grindelwald, and led the forces of the light against Voldemort. Jean-Sebastian had to admit to himself that the Headmaster was more than a little intimidating at the moment.

"Forcing a student to write lines with a blood quill, Madam? It is a little severe, even for you. Is it not?"

"I may discipline the students in any manner that I feel necessary, Headmaster. I am the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, and you have no say in the matter."

"You stupid woman!" Jean-Sebastian growled. "I am not even a citizen of this country and I know that a blood quill is a class three restricted item. The mere possession of one by anyone other than the goblins or a solicitor merits a fine."

"I have permission from the Minister himself," Umbridge said, waving them off.

"The Minister is irrelevant," Dumbledore snapped. "The law is the law and no one is above it. I believe you do not realize the severity of the situation, Madam. You have not only brought such an item into a school, but you have also forced a student to write lines with it. Do you not realize that almost every member of the Wizengamot has some relative attending this school? What do you think their

reactions will be when they hear that you may be using it on members of their families?"

Once again Umbridge waved their remarks off, seemingly unconcerned. "I am sure that the right families with students who obey the rules know that their children would never be subjected to such harsh penalties. Only the true troublemakers who are attempting to ruin this institution merit such punishment, for it is the only way to correct their misbehavior."

"You are insane if you believe that the Wizengamot will do anything but condemn you for this, regardless of what students are being punished."

"Regardless, it does not matter," insisted Umbridge. "I may punish those who break the rules in whatever manner I deem fit. You have no authority to stop me."

Dumbledore stood tall and proud and he stepped forward, causing Umbridge to shrink back in sudden fear. "I have all the authority I require, as Hogwarts herself considers me to be the Headmaster of this school. And this does not even mention my mandate as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot." His voice was icy and low and the woman's features became even paler than they already were. "The use of a blood quill is not punishment or discipline—it is torture. I will not allow it to continue. You will hand over whatever remaining blood quills you have in your possession immediately!"

"I certainly will not—"

"Yes you will!" Dumbledore barked. "By the authority of the Wizengamot, I demand that you hand those vile instruments over this instant! If you do not, I will take them from you, and by Merlin I will then see you to the gates of Azkaban myself. Do not try my patience further, Madam!"

Umbridge stumbled back once again, but this time she did not respond. She merely opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a box, handing it to Dumbledore with shaking hands. Dumbledore opened the box and peered inside, noting the fact that it contained well over two dozen of the quills. He closed it once again, scowling at the woman.

"It appears that Harry was not your only target, was he?" he snapped.

Umbridge drew herself up as tall as she could with her diminutive frame. "The Minister will hear of this, Headmaster."

"I assure you that he will," Dumbledore said in response. "As will the Wizengamot, the Prophet, and anyone else that I can think of. I suggest you pack your bags, Madam, as your stay in this school will likely be of short duration."

The woman's sneer was back in all its glory. "You have no authority to remove me, Headmaster. I am here by the appointment of the Minister himself."

"We shall see how long that lasts, Madam."

Jean-Sebastian glanced at the Headmaster with some surprise—he had intended to have the woman removed that evening, and could not understand why Dumbledore would delay. She was clearly a danger to all the students, especially to the ones with whom Jean-Sebastian was most concerned.

A quelling look met his unspoken query, however, and Jean-Sebastian let the matter go for the time being—obviously Dumbledore had something else up his sleeve, and Jean-Sebastian stepped back and allowed him to dictate events. It was his school, after all. He would have an accounting, though, he thought grimly.

"Your right to assign detentions is hereby revoked," Dumbledore continued, "Do not even try to do so, as I will know and I will throw you from the school myself should you attempt it."

Umbridge's eyes narrowed and her mouth opened, but Dumbledore did not allow her to speak. "And also be aware that any points you assign or deduct will be reviewed as long as you are still at this school. I would suggest you avoid using the points system at all."

"And I will be instructing Fleur, Harry, and all of their friends that they are not to attend your class in the future," Jean-Sebastian snarled. "You will never teach any child for whom I am responsible again—that I assure you. And if you so much as look at them in the wrong



manner, I will have the Aurors here to drag you off to a prison cell where you belong."

"I would like to see you try, Ambassador," Umbridge shrilled in response.

"Leave it, Delores," Dumbledore stated. "You may not realize it, but you have already lost. I will have you removed from this school as soon as may be, and you will not be returning."

Turning his back on her, Dumbledore stalked from the room while Jean-Sebastian, with one final glare, turned to follow him.

"Please explain to me why you did not remove her from the school, Headmaster," Jean-Sebastian demanded as they walked back toward the Headmaster's office.

"Of course, Jean-Sebastian, but please let us talk in my office."

Though perhaps he would have preferred to demand an answer immediately, Jean-Sebastian inclined his head. He did not stop fuming as they walked through the hallways of Hogwarts; the protective instinct which he had always held toward his children—though perhaps not as visibly displayed as the one his wife possessed—was fully aroused, demanding to be appeased.

In the office, the Headmaster immediately sat behind his desk and steepled his fingertips and Jean-Sebastian felt as though he was once again in school about to be scolded for some prank or misdeed. Scowling, and annoyed that the venerable man made him feel this way, Jean-Sebastian tried again.

"Headmaster, would you like to explain why that woman is not on her way to a Ministry holding cell?"

"Because, Jean-Sebastian, our position is much stronger if she is removed by Minister Fudge himself. And you and I will fan the flames of what is certain to be a scandal for the Minister, ensuring that he has no choice but to do so."

Jean-Sebastian frowned at the Headmaster. "So this has become a political game?"

"It has been a political game ever since the Minister decided to involve himself in the workings of this school, Ambassador. I must have full rein again to hire a Defense Professor who is qualified and more importantly, one who is not controlled by the Minister. To do that, my position must be as strong as possible—hence my desire to force the Minister to sack Umbridge himself. It also carries the added benefit of removing her from her post as Senior Undersecretary."

"You have a candidate in mind?" Jean-Sebastian asked, his curiosity aroused by Dumbledore's cryptic statements.

"I do," Dumbledore confirmed. "However, my choice will not be available until the new year. I will have to come up with other arrangements until then, and having Fudge completely preoccupied with damage control will give me the space I will need to do so."

It did, Jean-Sebastian had to admit, make a great deal of sense. The more primitive part of him, however, wanted blood that instant. Umbridge was a blight upon society no matter how competent or intelligent she was—or was not, as the case may be—and her instant removal from the government, as well as Hogwarts, was a very desirable outcome. His children were protected in that they would not be attending any more of her classes, her blood quills were confiscated, and her teeth were essentially pulled. And if the woman was stupid enough to try anything in the halls of Hogwarts against his children, it would make the task of incarcerating her in Azkaban all that much easier.

"I suppose you are correct, Headmaster," he grudgingly admitted. "But if she tries anything with my children, I can promise you I will not be held accountable for my actions."

"Leave the protection of the children to me—I assure you that I will not allow anything to happen to them. I need to you play your part as Harry's guardian and as the Ambassador to England, not be involved with vengeful attacks against the Undersecretary."

Jean-Sebastian nodded tightly before he moved to the other topic which had bothered him as they were listening to Harry and Umbridge. "I was wondering about something else—you did not seem to be surprised that the Undersecretary possessed blood quills. Would you care to elaborate on that?"

Smiling, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "It is amazing what one can glean with a little passive Legilimency and an unguarded mind."

"You did know." Jean-Sebastian was implacable, and he was highly offended that Dumbledore had essentially used Harry as bait, regardless of the fact that Harry had insisted upon putting himself in the line of fire.

"Not that she had blood quills specifically," Dumbledore replied. "Her mind is remarkably open—she has no skill in Occlumency at all. But even so, as you are well aware, passive Legilimency only gives an indication of surface thoughts, and active Legilimency is illegal, except under certain circumstances. I was able to discern that she wanted to make an example of Harry and try to cow him into holding his tongue about Voldemort. What exactly she meant to do I was not certain, but I did know it involved something I would not find acceptable. Unfortunately, the woman truly believes that she can get away with anything as long as she has the Minister's backing, so I could not be certain exactly how far she meant to go."

"And what about her presence at this school? She has been enacting decrees to curb the freedom of the students, from what I understand."

"All part of her plan to take over the school. You may not have heard, but the Minister made a decree yesterday making her the 'High Inquisitor' of Hogwarts, giving her all sorts of powers to review professors' performances, change curriculum, among other things. It was all part of their plan to eventually take over the school and force my removal."

"And now?" Jean-Sebastian asked, reflecting that if she had ever truly gotten control over the school, Harry and Fleur would have been pulled from the premises immediately.

"Now, I go back to the Wizengamot to inform them of her actions, while you go through your diplomatic channels to make an issue of her treatment of your ward. We shall also take the story to the Daily Prophet, the Quibbler, and every other public forum that we can manage. By the weekend the furor over this scandal will be so intense that Fudge will have no choice but to sack her."

"And perhaps take Fudge down in the process."

Dumbledore stroked his beard for a moment before he shook his head. "Although a desirable outcome, I suspect the Minister will be able to wriggle his way out of this. He is far too politically savvy to allow himself to be snared in this scandal. At the very least, however, it will tarnish his image and weaken his position."

Grimacing, Jean-Sebastian rose and shook the Headmaster's hand. "Unfortunately, I suspect you are correct. He stepped toward the Floo, before he stopped and looked back at Dumbledore. "I shall not wait until the morning to move on this."

"Excellent. She has finally given us a reason to remove her, Jean-Sebastian—let us make the most of it."

Nodding, Jean-Sebastian entered the Floo, not at all anticipating another tongue-lashing which he was certain he would receive from Appoline.

In the Gryffindor common room, Harry was enjoying the full attention of his housemates as he told the story of the detention he had just served and the manner in which the Headmaster arrived to put Umbridge in her place. The audience to which he was speaking would normally have made him somewhat annoyed or uneasy as he truly was not enamored of his fame. On this occasion, however, he was enjoying the attention immensely, not only for the opportunity it brought him to expose the fool woman for the idiot she was, but also because every student had had to suffer through her classes the same as he had, and deserved to savor her defeat. Revenge was sweet indeed.

Fleur, however, was not impressed with the news of the punishment the woman had tried to mete out. "That woman made you use un plume de sang?" she shrieked as Harry neared the point where he had begun to write with the quill.

At Harry's blank look, Fleur sighed with some exasperation and explained. "A plume de sang... a blood quill is a quill which magically writes using your blood instead of ink. The magic causes it to literally carve the written strokes into your hand—it can be quite

painful if done many times in a row. Solicitors use them to sign legal documents, as do the goblins."

Showing her the pink outline on his hand, Harry remarked, "Like this?"

An outraged cry escaped Fleur's throat as she grasped his hand and inspected it. "How many times did she make you write these lines?" she all but growled.

"I must have written them about twenty times or so," Harry said after thinking a moment.

"That... that... stupid..." Incensed, Fleur broke into a long diatribe in French, and if Harry was to guess, it sounded like her language was not fit for polite society. After a few moments she had calmed down enough to revert back to English. "How dare she think she can get away with this?"

"It's all right, Fleur," soothed Harry. "I'm already away from her."

Fleur favored him with a glare, but Harry could tell that she was not angry with him. It was George who spoke up to explain.

"Harry, I don't think you completely understand Fleur's outrage."

"Prolonged use of a blood quill over a short period of time can result in weakness and fatigue," Fred continued. "It is sapping your blood, after all."

Harry gazed back at them with some surprise. "They are that dangerous?"

"They can be," Fleur affirmed. "They tap a certain amount of your blood when you use them, and if you use it enough, the blood loss can affect you. Add to that the fact that if you wrote the same line often enough you would eventually cut it into your skin. Without a healer or Essence of Dittany handy, you would have a scar for the rest of your life."

"That I already knew," said Harry with a snort while rubbing his hand. "I could already see the beginnings of the outline forming when your father walked in."

"I guess he wasn't happy," said Fleur somewhat slyly.

"Ripped her a new one," said Harry with a certain measure of smugness.

Fleur, however, was confused. "Ripped her a new what?"

Muffled laughter and snorts were heard all around the room. Fleur glared at those who could not keep their countenances, while Harry hastened to explain.

"It means that he..."

"Berated her," Hermione supplied helpfully.

"What she said," Harry declared, pointing a thumb at Hermione.

"Good," said Fleur. "I think we'll be rid of the stupid woman in no time. Even your Minister will not be able to ignore this for long."

"I'd imagine that's what Dumbledore and your dad are talking about right now."

At that moment, the portrait hole opened and Professor McGonagall walked into the Gryffindor common room. She stood surveying the suddenly quiet room, until her eyes lit upon Harry. She shook her head, presumably at the obvious fact that he was sharing exactly what had happened with Umbridge that evening with everyone. She approached Harry and after greeting the members of her house, made her intentions known without preamble.

"I understand your detention with Professor Umbridge tonight resulted in some rather... unorthodox punishment."

Harry agreed and she continued. "When I heard, I thought I would come and survey the damage myself. May I?"

Wordlessly, Harry raised his hand to show the professor the marks left by Umbridge's quills, prompting a tsking sound from the Transfiguration Professor.

"The stupid woman," McGonagall grumbled. "I cannot imagine how she could possibly have thought that she'd have gotten away with this outrage."

"I think that rational thought isn't exactly her forte, Professor," said Harry dryly.

A brief smile met his declaration, before McGonagall was all business once again.

"Your guardian has declared that you shall not attend another of Umbridge's classes," she told them. "However, I believe we should make this incident a pointed reminder to Madam Umbridge," no one missed her refusal to refer to the woman as a professor, "that the assault of one of our Gryffindors shall not be tolerated. I believe, therefore, that we should show our support by ensuring that none of you attend her classes."

The approbation was unanimous, as cheers and whistles echoed throughout Gryffindor tower. The house of the lion all seemed to understand that a good push may have the hated professor removed from the school, and considering attending her classes was a colossal waste of time, missing them was no sacrifice.

"Very well then. We shall see the Madam's face tomorrow when no one from Gryffindor house's fourth year attends her class in the morning."

"I think we can come up with a special surprise for her too," said one of the twins with an evil smirk.

"A rousing send off will be just the thing for morale," agreed his partner in crime, his expression mirroring his twin's.

McGonagall regarded the two pranksters with some amusement, before her expression turned stern. "Officially, I cannot sanction such behavior. Unofficially, I never heard you discussing your plans. Don't get caught."

With that, she turned and exited the tower, leaving a common room full of surprised students. McGonagall had always projected the image of a straitlaced and strict taskmistress—she must truly despise Umbridge, a sentiment which was well understood by her

house members. Soon the expressions of surprise turned to smirks. Life at Hogwarts was about to become very uncomfortable for one Delores Jane Umbridge.

Dumbledore and Jean-Sebastian were indeed as good as their word when it came to exposing Delores Umbridge's deeds at Hogwarts. Immediately after his meeting with the Ambassador concluded, Dumbledore Flooed the offices of the Daily Prophet and demanded to see the publishing editor of the paper. The man's displeasure from being pulled from an evening of relaxation at his home quickly gave way to astonishment and glee at the story which had fallen out of the sky into his lap. The fact that Umbridge herself was almost universally hated due to her strong-arm tactics and tendency to throw the Minister's name around in order to get her way only served to sweeten the revenge to be exacted.

Springing into action, the editor quickly had several staff reporters summoned with an eye toward breaking the initial story in the early edition of the next morning's paper. As was its wont, the headlines were sensational and provoked the desired reaction, proclaiming "Hogwarts Professor Disciplines with Blood Quill!" and "Boy-Who-Lived Forced to Write Lines in Own Blood!"

The very next day there were several more Daily Prophet reporters were seen poking around Hogsmeade, and though there was no one at the village who had any knowledge of the incident, the residents were not unwilling to speak of other matters, such as the behavior of Harry and his friends during Hogsmeade weekends, not to mention the few times the Defense Professor herself had appeared in the village. Of particular note was the brief incident at the Three Broomsticks between Harry and Malfoy, provided without hesitation by Madam Rosmerta. Needless to say, the perception of Harry and his temperament was only improved, while Malfoy was portrayed to be a bigoted bully. A certain blond ponce was not amused at seeing his name besmirched in print. The glare which he directed at Harry, however, was ignored gleefully—Malfoy was nothing more than an annoying insect, routinely to be ignored. And if, during the course of that day, Harry and his friends had coincidentally been found walking near the edge of Hogwarts grounds and been induced to make a brief statement—ironically during the time he and his fifth year friends should have been in Umbridge's Defense class—the matter was completely beyond the knowledge of his professors. As long as the reporters were not



violating Hogwarts' grounds, Harry was a citizen as well as a student, and his ability to speak for himself was not in question.

Upon the article's first appearance in the wizarding paper the following morning, Dumbledore again went into action. Using his powers as Chief Warlock, he quickly called an emergency session of the Wizengamot, with the intent of discussing Umbridge's actions at Hogwarts. His estimation of the members' reactions was not far from the mark, as many Wizengamot members did indeed have younger family members attending Hogwarts, and Umbridge's hasty statement that she would never use a blood quill on members of the "right families" was received in a remarkably dim light by almost all who were not extreme bigots.

It was the work of mere moments to have the members of the wizarding body support and pass a motion condemning her actions. In particular, Madam Bones and Madam Longbottom, both of whom had young wards attending Hogwarts in Harry's year, and both possessed of strong, no-nonsense personalities, became Dumbledore's staunchest allies in his effort to push Umbridge from her positions. It was easy to pass a further motion, demanding Umbridge's immediate termination, not only as Hogwarts High Inquisitor and Professor, but also from her position as Undersecretary. They argued that if her judgment was this questionable in a school full of children, then she had no business whatsoever working in a position which allowed her to influence government policy. The box of blood quills sitting on Dumbledore's desk in the Wizengamot chambers was a visible reminder of just what depths the woman was willing to descend to achieve her goals.

At the school, the delivery of the morning paper sent the Great Hall into a chaotic riot of hushed conversations and astonished reaction. The reaction was largely in Harry's favor, as no student wished to have to put up with the woman's form of punishment. Malfoy, predictably, glared at Harry in response to seeing his name besmirched in print, though he did, unsurprisingly, use the opportunity to heckle Harry. Even then, his success was questionable at best, as Harry merely favored him with a smirk before he ignored the ponce completely. Harry did oblige the masses and showed his hand—though the pink marks were now fading—to anyone who wished to see it. He considered some of the reactions over the top, especially those of many girls who had openly tittered about him over the years, now used the opportunity

to fawn over him, even in the presence of his betrothed. Overall, however, Harry was generally pleased with the positive attention he was receiving for a change. It was certainly better than when he had been accused of being the heir of Slytherin, or a glory seeking cheater who had used illicit means to be named a tournament champion.

As for Umbridge, she did not take this setback to her plans well at all. She showed up for breakfast the next morning completely unconcerned with the events of the previous evening. She had thought to enjoy a leisurely breakfast, after which she would Floo the Minister and tell him of Dumbledore's latest misstep, certain he would see to the return of her blood quills, and perhaps even use the Headmaster's actions as an excuse to remove him from the school.

The morning had not turned out as she had expected, however, as the arrival of the paper brought her pleasant mood to an ignoble end. The sight of those offensive headlines enraged her, and the reactions of the students—she was the recipient of the disapproving glares of almost the entire hall within minutes—pushed her to the brink of apoplexy.

She was the Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic! How dare they attack her in this matter! Could they not see that she was merely trying to control a troublemaker and put an end to his lies and fear-mongering? She would see to it that they paid a harsh penalty for daring to oppose her!

Unfortunately, it did not work out the way she had intended, as her arrival to the Minister's office was met by the man himself, and he was clearly in no mood to be understanding.

"You stupid witch!" Fudge roared. "How could you have been caught with such instruments in a school? And by Dumbledore himself? I am simply amazed that you were stupid enough to allow yourself to be caught red-handed using such an item on his favorite protégé."

The fact that she had used the blood quill did not bother the Minister in the slightest—in other circumstances, it would have been a very effective tool in cowing the little troublemaker and enforcing discipline. However, the situation with Potter and their utter defeat during the lad's trial had called for a much more subtle approach.

Clearly he had been a fool to think that this woman was capable of acting with anything approaching subtlety.

"But Minister—"

Fudge, however, was in no mood to hear the woman's incessant whining and complaining. "I sent you to that school to enforce control and marginalize the Headmaster and the Boy-Who-Lived. Instead you have managed to bring the condemnation of our entire society down upon us, and you have strengthened the images of those we were trying to bring down. What were you thinking?"

By now Fudge could see Umbridge's clenched hands and the wild fury in her eyes. She had never taken well to being contradicted and this matter in which Potter and the Headmaster had clearly gotten the best of her was obviously straining her patience.

"You told me to use whatever means at my disposal to gain control of the situation, Minister," Umbridge shrilled.

"I did not tell you to torture a young boy who after everything else is considered a hero!" Fudge rejoined. "This situation required a little subtlety, and yet instead, you used your typical dragon in an apothecary approach and mucked it up completely!"

"You may not realize it, Madam, but Dumbledore has called an emergency session of the Wizengamot which is to start in ten minutes. I presume I do not need to inform you of the agenda for that meeting."

Umbridge's eyes widened comically, before an expression of disbelief settled over her features. "He wouldn't dare."

"Of course he would," snapped Fudge. "The man was eating political rivals for breakfast long before you were out of your nappies. You didn't really think he wouldn't jump all over this, did you?"

"In that case, it is well that I am here," Umbridge said with a sniff of disdain. "I shall defend myself against his charges in person."

"You shall do no such thing!" Fudge bellowed. "You have messed this situation up enough already."

"But Minister—"

"Enough! Given the mood in this building right now, I can't rule out the possibility of you not leaving that room unscathed. You will return to Hogwarts immediately, you will teach your classes, and you will not say one word out of line to any student. In the meantime, I will attempt to mitigate the damage you have caused."

It appeared to Fudge that Umbridge meant to protest his decision. She glared at him with a harsh eye for several moments before she abruptly turned and entered the Floo, screeching her destination in her high-pitched voice.

Fudge settled in behind his desk and dropped his head into his hands. In truth, he did not see any way out of the predicament the woman had incited. It was apparent that the Wizengamot would demand Umbridge's immediate termination, and with the Prophet, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and the outrage of society which he knew would be swift, it would take a miracle for him to be able to keep her at the school.

In truth, the Minister attended the Wizengamot session with little inclination to defend his Undersecretary. Fudge was, at heart, a political animal, albeit a corrupt one. He could see the writing on the wall, and it did not take him long to determine that there was relatively little he could do to protect his employee. His calls for an investigation into the matter were ignored—Madam Bones even brought up the fact that the Chief Warlock himself had discovered the woman's actions red-handed—and his appeals for calm went unheeded. He left the session thoroughly beaten and plotting to ensure he kept his own position. The sacrifice of Umbridge was regrettable as she had been useful as an attack dog, but personally he would not regret the loss of the woman in the slightest.

Back at Hogwarts, the expected explosion of fury was provoked and exceeded when the fourth year Gryffindors did not show up for their Defense class. Perhaps it was not surprising when the woman stormed into the Transfiguration classroom moments after the period had begun.

"Professor McGonagall!" she shouted as she stormed into the room. "Why have your fourth years not shown up for class this morning?"

The look with which McGonagall pierced the Defense Professor was akin to one which would be directed at a particularly annoying insect. "Can you not guess?" she responded with distaste.

The answer clearly took Umbridge aback, and her mouth flapped uselessly for several moments. "I certainly cannot!" Umbridge yelled after a few moments. "It is time for class. You will have your house in my classroom in five minutes, or I will see them all expelled!"

"You really expect me to put my house members in danger again after your actions yesterday? Truly, Delores, I knew you were stupid, but I did not know you could descend to this level of idiocy."

The redness of Umbridge's face caused the students to worry that she was about to burst a blood vessel and keel over dead from rage. Not that her loss would have been mourned—on the contrary, a dead body in a classroom would have provided weeks of gossip, and the fact that it was Umbridge would likely have had the student body cheering rather than mourning.

"I will see you lose your position for this, Professor!" Umbridge hissed. "I am the High Inquisitor for this institution, and I will be respected!"

"Respect is earned, Delores, not demanded," was McGonagall's implacable response. "I believe your actions yesterday have made respect impossible and your position as High Inquisitor nonexistent. Now leave my classroom so that I may resume my instruction."

Umbridge stormed from the room and immediately complained to the Headmaster, who by this time had returned from the Wizengamot chambers. She was to receive no satisfaction from him either, however, as Dumbledore merely sat through her rant with an impassive expression on his face, not speaking until her fury had run its course.

"I believe, Delores," he said at length, "that your lack of Gryffindor students is your own doing. I suspect that many parents have already instructed their children to boycott your class, and can only assume that Gryffindor house is only declaring their united support for one of their own."

"I'll see them all expelled!"

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair with a hard expression on his face. "If you believe for one moment that your wishes or demands will be met with anything other than contempt, you are sadly mistaken, Madam. As I stated previously, the situation is your own doing, and I suggest that you dismiss any thoughts of using this ridiculous 'High Inquisitor' position you and the Minister have cooked up, to get your own way. I will not allow it.

"And furthermore, I believe Gryffindor has the right of it in this matter," he continued over her protestations. "I am hereby cancelling all Defense classes until your situation has been resolved. I will make a further announcement at lunch today—you do not have any more classes before then, do you?"

Umbridge was so shocked that she was unable to respond. Dumbledore would have felt pity for her were she not such a detestable woman.

"Go back to your office, Delores—I shall ensure that any students remaining in your classroom are dismissed."

In fact, the students were already gone from the Defense classroom by the time Umbridge had returned. In their place, the classroom had been turned into a swamp, containing insects, foliage, and brackish water, with one or two crocodiles to complete the image. Umbridge, in a state of utter fury, completely neglected to note that her classroom had been turned into a scene directly out of the Florida Everglades, and fell face first into the muck, having to be rescued by Professor Snape who had been in the area removing his students from her classroom. Luckily for Umbridge, the crocodiles—though they were completely real—had been charmed to remove their aggression, though she did have a nasty shock when she came face to snout with one.

"You really must take better care to keep your classroom clear of obstructions like this, Delores," Snape drawled as he pulled her from the swamp.

This was all the assistance he gave her, however, as he left her immediately after. Her robes were soiled and dripping on the floor of the corridor, while her hair was a muddy, plastered mess, sticking to

her face as she gazed about in shock and confusion. In all, she resembled a mud wrestler more than a professor who had always been impeccably groomed. Regardless of the effort she expended could not remove the swamp from her classroom, and after a number of increasingly desperate attempts, she marched imperiously to her quarters—though the squelching of the mud in her shoes ruined her image of superiority—drawing the snickers of everyone who was fortunate enough to witness her difficulty.

Matters did not improve for the Defense Professor at lunch, as moments after she had sat down to her meal, her immaculate pink robes, which had once again been restored to their dubious glory, disappeared and became an alternating black and white striped jumpsuit, which again resisted all of her attempts to dispel. And if that was not enough, her hair soon lengthened and changed to a dull gray, and stubble appeared on her cheeks and chin, and soon the entire Great Hall was laughing of the picture she presented of a long-incarcerated cell block inmate,. And if the Weasley twins laughed harder than the other students and shot each other thumbs up, no one took any notice.

Her fury now reaching unprecedented levels, Umbridge shuffled from the Great Hall—the final gift from the prank appearing to be a severe case of arthritis—and was not seen again in the halls of Hogwarts that day, or for several days after. Many assumed she wished to avoid a repeat of her humiliation, while in reality she simply could not dispel the pranks and was forced to wait until they wore off.

The next day calls for Umbridge's removal began to appear in the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler ran a special edition to cover the scandal erupting on the Minister and his Undersecretary. The Quibbler's edition was especially noteworthy, as it contained an interview with Harry Potter himself, as well as a full account of exactly what had occurred in the Defense Professor's office that Halloween evening. And though it was known to only the few friends, Luna had written the articles herself and sent the transcripts of their discussions along to her father, who was happy to increase the circulation of his somewhat odd magazine by printing the statement of the Boy-Who-Lived.

The Minister found himself caught in a deluge of outraged Floo calls and howlers, the worst of which came from Molly Weasley. He was

certain that the woman's voice had been heard as far as the Orkneys, and her language was neither pleasant nor acceptable. The furor continued into the weekend as Fudge, though he was quite resigned to sacrificing Umbridge for his own greater good, delayed in sacking her in order to distance himself from her actions and subsequent fall. He employed every political trick he knew during those days, telling reporters he was "investigating" the woman's actions, piously calling for calm while his inquiries ran their course, and calling in several favors to keep the Wizengamot from calling for his own removal.

At length, however, he bowed to the inevitable, though in part it was Jean-Sebastian's final intervention which brought about an end to the situation. Jean-Sebastian had not been idle. Since leaving the Headmaster's office, he had made his sentiments known through his diplomatic channels—putting more pressure on Fudge through his own complaints, while involving the highest level of the French magical government in the matter as well. He had even used some of his ICW contacts to ensure that Umbridge's actions were known on the international stage as well. Though no meeting of the ICW was called, and no official resolution passed, the combined statements of several European Ambassadors was invaluable in its influence.

Fudge had finally been goaded into action, however, when Jean-Sebastian showed up in his office.

Walking into the Minister's office on that Sunday afternoon, Jean-Sebastian immediately noted the tired, almost haggard appearance of the British Minister. The man appeared as though he had spent almost every waking moment in the office since the scandal with his Undersecretary had broken—and he very likely had, considering the amount of effort he had had to expend in fending off the avalanche of accusation and condemnation which had befallen him.

And still he had not removed the woman from her positions. Jean-Sebastian had spent almost as much time as Fudge in the political world, and the reasons for Fudge's actions had not escaped his attention. This could not be allowed to go any further, however.

"Minister," was Jean-Sebastian's perfunctory greeting as he stepped into the office.



A scowl adorned Fudge's face as he peered up at Jean-Sebastian. "Ambassador, I am quite busy. If you would schedule an appointment with my assistant, I am sure I can spare a few moments for you some time during the week."

"I assure you, Minister, I will not take up much of your... valuable time," Jean-Sebastian responded with a look of distaste. "I believe it is in your best interests to hear what I have to say."

Without an invitation, Jean-Sebastian sat across from the Minister, noting the sniff of disdain he received at his pronouncement. Considering the feeling was decidedly mutual, Jean-Sebastian ignored the petty man and came right to the point.

"Minister, I am concerned, not only over the actions of your Undersecretary, but also for the fact that it is now five days after she used a blood quill to try to bully my ward, and yet she is a teacher at an institution of education."

An exaggerated sigh preceded Fudge's response. "Ambassador, I understand your frustration and impatience. I will make the same reply to you which I have made to everyone else who has pressed me on this matter—the matter is being investigated, and I will take the appropriate steps once that investigation is complete."

Jean-Sebastian leaned forward in his chair and affixed the Minister with a stern and implacable stare. "Let us not obfuscate here, Minister. I am well aware of the reason for your delay. I will not allow it to continue any further. If Madam Umbridge is not removed from her teaching position at Hogwarts this very evening, I will have no choice to pull both my wards from Hogwarts and transfer them to Beauxbatons immediately."

The Minister's consternation was instantly evident as he blanched. "But... but... why would you take Mr. Potter away now?" he sputtered. "He is very well taken care of at Hogwarts where he receives the best instruction available."

"Hogwarts is indeed a premier magical school," was Jean-Sebastian's sage response. "However, Beauxbatons can also claim to be its equal in many ways. I will be blunt—the fact that your Undersecretary has behaved in the manner in which she has, has me deeply troubled. In good conscience I cannot have my ward

exposed to the potential of any continuation of the treatment he has been subjected to. The Headmistress of Beauxbatons has assured me that Harry may begin his studies in France as early as tomorrow, and that everything—including language tutors and English instruction—can be provided to him. It is a very generous offer indeed, and one which I cannot turn down if Harry's potential safety is at stake."

Fudge's continued stammering would have been amusing under other circumstances, but in this instance, Jean-Sebastian had not time or patience for the man. He would have his assurances now, or Harry would move to a new school.

"Very well," Fudge managed at last. "I will attempt to hurry along the investigation and make a final determination of Madam Umbridge's status as soon as possible."

"Tonight, Minister," was Jean-Sebastian's steely reply. He stood and turned to leave, but paused at the door for one final warning. "I am in earnest, Minister. Do not test my resolve."

Knowing his hand had been forced and his tenure as Minister would almost certainly end should Harry leave the country, Fudge's response was instant, as he sacked Umbridge from all her positions. He was able to maintain his own hold on the Minister's office by insisting that he had sent her to the school to improve its quality, making certain to note that he had never approved the use of a blood quill on any student and that Umbridge's actions were her own, without any reference to him, any consultation on his part, or with the knowledge and approval of any other member of the Ministry. He did accept the criticism that as her superior he should have kept tighter rein on her actions in a showing of contrived remorse for the harm that it caused at the school. And though it galled him to do so, he even offered a Ministry apology to Harry for Umbridge's treatment, and an assurance that the next Defense Professor would not behave in such a manner.

And thus it was that Delores Umbridge's time as Hogwarts' Defense Professor met its rather ignoble end. Her things were packed and she was escorted by two Aurors and Headmaster personally to the entrance of the school, where the larger part of the student population had gathered to see her off. The stupid woman was not able to leave the school without a parting shot however, which came

verbally the moment she espied Harry watching her with a rather smug expression plastered on his face.

"You think you've won, don't you, you disgusting little Half-blood!"

"I don't think I've won," Harry drawled, "I know I've won."

"Do not become too complacent, Mr. Potter," Umbridge snarled, though the hardness of her voice, combined with her high-pitched nasal whine was more comical than threatening. "I will have my revenge upon you, and all of your little friends."

"She sounds like the Wicked Witch of the West, doesn't she?" Hermione said. "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too!" she cackled in a credible impression of the classic movie villain, causing the hall to erupt in laughter, especially from the Muggle-born and Half-blood students who recognized the reference.

"That is enough, Delores," Dumbledore spoke up from behind Umbridge. "Leave this school immediately, and do not return."

Though Umbridge directed a glare of pure loathing at the Headmaster, she said nothing further as she walked out of the school to the laughter of the assembled crowd. As a parting shot, the Weasley twins had once again pranked her. Whereas from the front her pink robes looked as they ever did, when she turned her back, she appeared once again to be wearing the striped jumpsuit from earlier in the week. The laughter of the crowd did not endear them to her any further than they already were, but for once she held her tongue. Instead she stalked to the edge of the wards and apparated away.

The final note to the saga of Umbridge as Defense Professor was that she was able to avoid prison time in Azkaban for her deeds. The penalty for the possession of a blood quill was indeed a fine, but the use of said instrument on a minor was not as clear cut. In the end she was able to bargain with Fudge for his support in pushing for a lenient sentence. As a result, she was able to avoid prison time in favor of an increased fine. In return, Fudge was able to gain her pledge that she would remain silent about some of the questionable activities he had engaged in during the course of his administration. And though Dumbledore would rather have seen her in prison, he unfortunately did not have the support in the Wizengamot for a

conviction which included prison time, as the Wizengamot was still influenced by those who believed in blood purity. As Umbridge was a Pure-blood, many members were reluctant to relegate her to Azkaban. So he wisely allowed the matter to drop, instead seeing to it that she was hit as hard financially as he could manage. In addition to the fine for the blood quills and their use, a further fine was levied for her comments and threats toward Harry as she was leaving the school. In the end, the fines and penalties were substantial.

Though she was a Pureblood, she was not from a wealthy family; the largest part of the gold she had been able to amass had come from her pay at the Ministry, and her skimming of some of the moneys Fudge had received for his support of various bills and activities, mostly from Lucius Malfoy. The fines took a rather large bite out of her vault, though some of her losses were returned by the Minister from his own vault, in a further attempt to buy her silence in the matter of his own activities. One might have believed that she would have revealed the Minister's activities for spite and revenge alone, but his guarantee that she would be spared Azkaban—coupled with his assurance that she would join him there if she ratted him out—was enough to sway her. No rational person wished to face any possibility of a date with a Dementor, after all.

A final conversation about the position of Defense Professor took place between Fudge and Dumbledore, but in that matter, Fudge found himself somewhat mollified, but again somewhat frustrated.

"I have come to inform you of the identity of your new Defense Professor, Headmaster," Fudge stated without preamble after he stepped from the Floo.

Dumbledore removed his glasses and massaged his temples wearily. It was beyond belief that the Minister still believed that he could control Hogwarts after the spectacular failure of his first choice. Then again, Fudge had always been somewhat blind when he was focused upon his own goals.

"Really, Cornelius, didn't Umbridge's failure teach you anything?"

"What Delores did was reprehensible, Dumbledore, but that is not the point. You require a new Defense Professor, and I have come to appoint one."

"I assure you that is not necessary," Dumbledore responded.

Shocked, Fudge glared at Dumbledore with suspicion evident in his manner. "What do you mean?"

"Only that I have a replacement for Defense already lined up, Minister."

The suspicion in the Minister's eyes increased. "Who?"

"I am afraid that I cannot divulge that information at this time, Minister. Not until I have completed negotiating a contract with the candidate."

"So it's not completed yet?" Fudge said, jumping on the admission as an opportunity to still have his own way.

"No, it is not," was Dumbledore's patient response. "In fact, my candidate will not be able to assume his position until the New Year. Until that time, I shall be taking over the position in the interim. I will only be required to cover the class until Christmas break anyway."

"I'm afraid that is not good enough, Headmaster," Fudge crowed. "I will have to appoint a replacement if your candidate cannot begin immediately."

Dumbledore slowly stood up and turned a menacing gaze on the Minister. "Really Minister, have you not suffered enough of a black eye already with this course of action? We both know that you have only held your position by the slimmest of margins—are you willing to risk being ushered from your office over this? If I take your insistence on interfering with this school again to the Wizengamot, I may have enough votes to remove you."

"Is that a threat, Dumbledore?" Fudge snarled.

"It is merely an observation, Minister," Dumbledore responded. "I have a candidate lined up, and have a plan to cover the class until he is ready to assume his position. The needs of your ridiculous law have been met, and as such, you have no further reason to meddle in this school."

Fudge chewed his lip in indecision. Either that or he was looking for a way to turn the situation back to his advantage. Dumbledore knew he had the Minister, but he was not above throwing the man a bone to placate him.

"If it helps, Cornelius, I assure you that I have no intention whatsoever of pushing for your position. I am quite busy dealing with the positions I already hold. Is that good enough, or do you need me to swear an oath?"

"Very well," the Minister said at length. "Let me know who your candidate is as soon as you can. I will leave you to run your school."

With a short bow, the Minister retreated back through the Floo, allowing Dumbledore to once again take his seat and begin to work through the paperwork that had built up the previous few days. Finally, perhaps, a little sanity could be returned to the school.

A/N: I've always thought that the fact that no one could do anything against Umbridge was utterly stupid and unbelievable, not to mention that Harry's passivity even though she was essentially torturing him was out of character. This sequence was one of the first things I planned out when I conceived this story. I hope you all enjoyed it.

## Chapter 21 – A New Professor

The Sunday evening after Madam Umbridge was escorted from Hogwarts premises, Harry received a summons to the Headmaster's office. Unlike the previous times he had been to see Dumbledore that year, the invitation was for him alone, and did not include Fleur and Hermione.

When he queried them, they laughed at him and sent him on his way.

"What, are you afraid of facing the big, bad Headmaster on your own?" teased Hermione.

"I'm sure it's fine, Harry," added Fleur. "You can tell us what he wants when you get back."

It was therefore Harry alone who found himself seated in front of the Headmaster's desk, feeling somewhat uncomfortable at the way the man was looking at him. He had never really felt uncomfortable with Dumbledore before, but the look he was being given now seemed to suggest that Dumbledore knew all of his secrets. Or at least whatever secrets he fancied he possessed.

"I assume you are happy with the end result of Madam Umbridge's stay here, Harry?" the Headmaster began.

"It would have been better if she'd never showed up at all," Harry groused. "But at least she's gone now and the Minister won't meddle any more."

The Headmaster had already made the announcement that he would take over Defense for the rest of the year, and Harry found himself curious to see how Dumbledore would teach the subject. There was no disputing the man's expertise—he had defeated Grindelwald, after all—but Harry knew that he had been the Transfiguration Professor when he had been a teacher. The experience in teaching one subject would undoubtedly be invaluable, but it was, in the end, a different subject. But he could hardly be any worse than most of the other Defense Professors that had held the position since Harry arrived at Hogwarts.

"Yes, indeed," Dumbledore agreed pleasantly. "It has been too long since I have been in a classroom and I look forward to teaching once again."

Harry murmured that he was looking forward to having Dumbledore as a teacher, before he fell silent, waiting for the Headmaster to get to the point of his summons.

"Now, Mr. Potter, I would appreciate it if you would tell me of this club which you and your friends have organized."

Flabbergasted, Harry stared at the Headmaster, wondering how the man had ever known of the club. They had taken every precaution not only to hide it from Umbridge, but from all the professors, and it seemed rather silly now to know Dumbledore had been on to them the whole time.

"How did you know about the club?" Harry asked. He then colored at the thought he had spoken so disrespectfully. "I'm sorry, Professor, I—"

"It is nothing, Harry," Dumbledore assured him with a smile. "But let's just say that though it is impossible for me to know everything which goes on at this school, I at least try to keep abreast of major events. Though it is not well known what you are doing, I would class such an activity as a significant event. Can I assume that you began it as a means to combat your lack of instruction offered by Madam Umbridge's class?"

"Yes, Sir," Harry responded. "Auror Moody told us that we needed to practice what he taught us, and we decided it would be a good time to teach others about it too."

"Very prudent, Harry," approved Dumbledore. "The question is, what do you intend to do with it now that Madam Umbridge has been removed from the Defense Professorship?"

That question had not really occurred to Harry yet, as he had simply been happy to be rid of the woman.

"I don't know, Sir," he said. "I suppose now that we will get a proper professor, we don't really need the club any longer."



"You don't?" asked the Headmaster.

"You think we do, Sir?"

"I should think that your opinion on the matter would be much more important than mine. You and your friends saw a need and you moved to fill that need, which shows initiative and organization, but now that you will be receiving better instruction—hopefully, anyway—" Dumbledore stated with a self deprecating chuckle, "it does not necessarily follow that the club is no longer necessary."

"You think we should continue it?"

Dumbledore sighed and leaned forward, resting his arms on his desk as he directed an intent look at Harry. "You know that dark times are approaching, Harry," he stated. "In fact, with the return of Voldemort last June, one could truthfully say that dark times are already upon us.

"The truth of the matter is that the education you receive at Hogwarts is valuable, but will be insufficient to see you through what is to come. I agreed to have Alastor teach you because I felt it would benefit you and help you improve and become better able to defend yourself. I see this club as a continuation of that effort, Harry, and I cannot commend your foresight in organizing it enough."

"I wasn't exactly my doing, Sir," Harry replied bashfully. "Hermione and Fleur had to talk me into it. I wasn't exactly keen on the idea at the beginning."

"And that is why they are such good friends and influences on you. It is said that behind every great man is a great woman—or I daresay even two—urging him on the path to greatness. Listen to their council. Their feelings for you, their desire to see you succeed is such that they will never lead you wrong, should you choose to allow them to inspire you."

"Yes Sir," was Harry's automatic response.

"Good. Now, as for the composition of this club... I understand that it is primarily made up of upper years?"

"There are a few younger ones, but most are at least fourth year and higher."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore. "That is about the time when one is capable of learning to truly defend oneself, not to mention having the power available to do so. Please tell me who you have invited to join your club."

Harry obliged, telling the Headmaster of those they invited to join the club, the location they were using, as well as the methods they were using to get them to the meeting room undetected, though he supposed that was not truly necessary any longer.

"It sounds like you have everything under control," Dumbledore finally responded with some approval. "I have noticed that you have rather pointedly left out Slytherin house from your club."

"I'm not exactly friendly with anyone from Slytherin," Harry replied defensively. "Besides, I wouldn't want to teach Malfoy how to beat me."

"I suppose you wouldn't at that," said Dumbledore. "I do understand your reasoning in this matter, Harry, but I would caution you against painting the entire house with the same brush. Not all of Slytherin house is affiliated with the Death Eaters, nor is everyone in Gryffindor house noble and true. Peter Pettigrew proves that point, does he not?"

"He does, Sir."

"Besides, even Mr. Malfoy may some day regret his behavior and change his ways. Second chances should always be available for those who are truly penitent."

Harry could hardly believe his ears—was Dumbledore truly suggesting that Draco Malfoy would ever be anything but a cold, bigoted, ferrety little git, whose lifelong ambition was the destruction of any he considered "inferior?" The man was wise, but Harry could not ever see such a thing happening.

"With all due respect, Sir," he responded cautiously, "the only time Malfoy wants a second chance is when his hex misses you the first time."

With a sigh, Dumbledore removed his half-moon glasses and rubbed his temples. "Unfortunately, I fear you are correct. Mr. Malfoy seems to eagerly embrace his father's teachings, and shows no inclination to see reason.

"I am not suggesting you unilaterally forgive and accept Mr. Malfoy and those of his circle," Dumbledore said, putting his glasses back on and regarding Harry in a very serious manner. "I daresay he has made life uncomfortable for you and your friends since you have arrived at Hogwarts, and that the situation between you is such that there is little to be done to close the gap. All I suggest is that you keep an open mind about others and remember that sometimes things are not as they seem."

"I understand, Sir."

"Very well then. I am now officially sanctioning your club, and giving you full rights to hold your meetings without all the secrecy which was necessary when Madam Umbridge was resident in this school. You will, of course, require a staff sponsor, whether or not they attend your meetings. Had you given any thought to whom you would ask to be your sponsor?"

"We hadn't really, Sir," Harry responded slowly. "Our goal was to keep it from everyone on the staff so that if we were discovered they couldn't use it against you. But I have heard that Professor Flitwick was a well-known duelist."

"He was indeed. I will leave it to you to approach him. I only ask that you do so before your next meeting."

Harry agreed, and after a few more minutes of conversation with the Headmaster, he left to return to the common room.

The news that Dumbledore had been aware of their activities prompted initial shock, but soon a sense of reality settled over the trio. As Hermione pointed out, there were several ways in which he could have kept tabs on them, and he had a reason to do so with Umbridge wreaking havoc in the school. At the very least he could have assigned a house-elf to watch them, or merely questioned the portraits who, thought they may not have been able to give him

specifics, would have at least seen enough to allow him to make some educated guesses.

There was a sense of excitement in the school at the news that the Headmaster would be taking over Defense Professor Duties. The fact that he had bested Grindelwald to end that Dark Lord's reign of terror was a matter of known, recent history, and it was well known that he was the only wizard whom Voldemort feared. However, none of the younger generation had ever had the opportunity to see the man in action, so there was understandably some curiosity about his exact abilities.

The one change which was necessitated by Dumbledore taking over Defense, however, was that due to time constraints and his duties as Headmaster—among other things—he was not able to teach the schedule as it currently existed. Therefore, each year was combined into one large class, and instead of the class meeting twice a week, one of the classes was extended, and the other cancelled. For the fifth year students, as their Defense class was scheduled for Monday and Wednesday afternoons, the new schedule dictated that their Monday class was extended by an hour, and their Wednesday class was cancelled. This made their Mondays even busier than before, as Defense would now abut directly onto the dinner hour, but it made their Wednesdays lighter by comparison, allowing them more time to prepare for the meeting of the Defense Club. And though these changes meant that they would now be required to share defense class with all the fifth years—including Malfoy and the other Slytherins—overall Harry and his Gryffindor year-mates were happy with the changes, and eager to receive instruction from such a famed wizard.

The day after Umbridge's departure, all of the fifth years of Hogwarts filed into their new classroom. As the official Defense classroom was not large enough to hold their numbers, they had been directed to another room which was closer to the Great Hall. The new room had the advantage of being much larger than the old room, and once the house-elves had transferred desks, blackboards, and other paraphernalia from the Defense classroom, it appeared as welcoming as the traditional defense classroom, only larger.

They had just situated themselves in their seats, when Malfoy and his cronies sauntered into the classroom and took seats behind and a little to the side of Harry and his friends.

"Hey Scarface, I bet you're crying in relief that the big bad Defense Professor is gone," he snarked. "The Creature's daddy had to come and chase her away from you, didn't he?"

"I guess I'm starting to take some lessons from you, Ferret," Harry retorted. "You taught me through your excellent example of hiding behind Daddy's robes every time the going gets rough."

"Now let's have enough of that and be civil, shall we not?" interrupted Dumbledore as he strode into the room. He stopped and peered at the two antagonists, Harry abashed, Malfoy defiant. "I understand there is no love lost between you two, but in class you may suspend your rivalry and act like young men should be expected to act. That will be three points from you, Mr. Malfoy, for provoking a confrontation, and an additional five points for your insult to Miss Delacour. Mr. Potter, that will also be three points from you for your own insults."

Draco sputtered in indignation. "Why does he only get three points?"

"Because you started the confrontation, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore stated pointedly. "Had Mr. Potter fired the first shot, his would have been the greater penalty."

Malfoy appeared as though he wanted to protest further, but he was again interrupted by the Headmaster. "Do you wish to earn further point deductions, Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy's mouth snapped shut and he stared sulkily back at the Headmaster. Satisfied, Dumbledore turned away and made his way toward the front of the class. Harry, smirking at his nemesis mouthed, "When my father hears," at Malfoy, gleefully noting the redness of the boy's rage. He then pointedly ignored the ponce, attending the Headmaster who had turned to face the class.

"Welcome to Defense class," said Dumbledore, sweeping the class with his gaze. "I am happy to be with you all today. It has been many years since I taught, and I must admit that I have been looking forward to it immensely."

He began to pace in front of them, his brows furrowed in thought. "I understand that your Defense experience this year has been

somewhat... lacking, especially in the realm of practical application. We have already lost two months of study, and my schedule will not allow for me to take all the classes as they were originally scheduled. You will therefore be working at a much quicker pace, and much of the practice of the things you learn will need to be on your own time. I believe, however, that you are all capable of learning what you will need to know."

Stopping, Dumbledore once again ran his gaze over the class. "Before we begin, however, I believe we should be clear on exactly what we are learning. Can anyone tell me what exactly constitutes the dark arts?"

The Headmaster motioned to Hermione with a kindly smile when he saw her hand in the air.

"The dark arts refers to any magic which is mainly used to cause harm," Hermione stated in a clear voice.

"An excellent textbook description, Miss Granger—take two points for Gryffindor." He faced the class and raised an eyebrow. "Does anyone have any issue with Miss Granger's definition?"

"What about will and intent, Professor?" asked Susan Bones. "Cannot any spell which is intended to cause harm be considered to be a dark spell?"

"Interesting question, Miss Bones," Dumbledore said with a smile of approval. "Let us discuss it, shall we? Can anyone name a spell which can be used for harm?"

"The cutting curse," said Terry Boot.

"Excellent, Mr. Boot. Now, in what way can the cutting curse be used for harm?"

"Well, you could behead your enemy in a duel with it."

Dumbledore chuckled. "In some more extreme cases, yes you could, though it would take a highly powerful cutting curse to do that much damage. What else can you do with a cutting curse? Does it have any good uses?"

"You can use it to cut off the stalk of a plant, or to slice an orange in half," said Padma Patil.

"Very good, Miss Patil." He looked around the class before continuing. "We have a single spell which can be used for both good and ill intents. Therefore, in this case it is clearly shown that though the spell can perhaps be used to harm, it was not necessarily intended to be a dark spell. The will and intent of the caster is specifically needed to determine whether the spell is used in a dark manner."

The class digested this as Dumbledore paused for a moment. Harry, his Defense Professors having largely been ineffective or incompetent his entire time at Hogwarts, was enjoying the philosophical discussion immensely. Even in Remus's class they had done a lot of practical work, and learned about dark creatures, but a discussion about the nature of dark magic had never been part of the curriculum.

"Are all spells like this one? Does the intent of the caster always determine whether the spell is used in a dark manner, or are there spells, potions, wards, acts, etc, which are harmful by nature."

"There are spells that by their nature are purely dark," Harry said, once Dumbledore indicated that he should speak. "The Unforgivables, by their very nature, are dark spells and have no light applications."

"Spoken like a true coward," Draco scoffed from behind.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrow and regarded the Malfoy scion. "You have a different opinion, Mr. Malfoy?"

Puffing himself up in his self importance, Draco stated pompously, "My father told me that there is no light or dark. There is merely power and those with the right and ability to exercise that power."

"And who decides who has that right, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Those with the right know it," Malfoy responded with a shrug. "There are those who are superior by their very existence as heirs of many generations of magical ability. Those who are so chosen have no need to justify their actions, for they work for the betterment of

the wizarding world in the prevention of its tainting by those of a lesser station."

Shaking his head, Dumbledore regarded Draco severely. For Harry, though he had always known of what Malfoy believed, he had never heard the blond state his beliefs with such clarity and in such a public forum. This was a dangerous person—just as his father and his father's master were dangerous. Regardless of Dumbledore's desire—and it was a noble desire—to redeem people such as Malfoy, Harry knew there was little chance he would ever change. His father's teachings were far too ingrained in him for there to ever be room for any kind of competing viewpoint.

"I am unsurprised your father has taught such things, given what I have seen of his behavior," responded Dumbledore, a slight hint of sadness entering his voice. "But regardless of what you have been told, there is a distinct delineation between the dark arts and other magic—not all magic can have a benevolent application.

"For example, let us speak of the killing curse. For most of those in this room, casting a killing curse at me would do next to nothing. Can anyone tell me why?"

At his signal, Ron spoke up. "The killing curse takes a lot of power to cast properly."

"Very good, Mr. Weasley. Your answer is correct, but only part of the answer. Can anyone tell me what else is necessary to properly cast the killing curse?"

"The killing curse is also powered by hate, Professor," Harry stated when Dumbledore motioned to him.

"Exactly, Mr. Potter—take two more points for Gryffindor." Dumbledore fell silent and surveyed the class once again. "Yes, the killing curse requires a significant level of power to cast, but it is also fueled by the caster's hate. You could state the incantation and summon the necessary power, but if you have not summoned the hatred necessary to truly cast the spell, it would have little effect. Given that, is there any practical application for the curse? For example, could you perform a mercy killing for a terminally ill patient?"



"Not unless you hated that person," said Daphne Greengrass.

"Exactly," stated Dumbledore. "Beyond the ethical concerns of performing a mercy killing, the killing curse is not useful in such circumstances, as you would have to power the curse with hate."

"But Professor," Harry said, "I know that the killing curse requires hatred, but not everyone is killed by someone who hates them. Death Eaters don't necessarily even know everyone they kill."

"Very interesting point, Mr. Potter," approved Dumbledore. "Can anyone shed any light on this seeming contradiction?"

The class was silent for several moments as the students ruminated on the question. Harry felt he likely knew the answer to the riddle, but decided he would let someone else speak.

It was several moments before Padma Patil raised her hand somewhat tentatively, speaking when Dumbledore motioned to her. "I think that the hate does not need to be specifically directed at someone to be effective. Death Eaters, for example, hate those with what they consider to be lesser bloodlines in general. Thus, when they cast that specific spell, their hatred is more general in nature than specific."

"Very good, Miss Patil. Take two points for Ravenclaw."

Dumbledore surveyed the room for several moments before he began speaking again. "Miss Patil has indeed hit upon the crux of the issue. The hatred need not be directed at a person for the curse to be effective, though it may very well be. Hatred is something which the human race in general seems to possess in abundance, and that hatred may be harnessed in order to allow a person to kill another. You will do well to remember that a killing curse may potentially come from an unexpected quarter—the caster does not have to hate you in order to kill you with it.

"In the example we were discussing, though your hate may allow you to cast the spell, a healer does not work in that fashion. The healer would more likely feel compassion than hatred. Though perhaps it is technically possible for a healer to use the curse to euthanize a patient, his oaths as a healer would prevent him from actually doing so.

"Thus, there is no practical application for using the curse, other than to kill an enemy whom you hate. I trust that for most of us in this room, evoking the necessary level of hatred would be impossible.

"There is indeed a branch of magic called the dark arts, and regardless of what you have been told," here Dumbledore did glance at a visibly dismissive Malfoy, "there are no good applications for this magic. Dark arts include the three Unforgivables, a few other curses, certain potions which are meant only to harm, and different rituals and other magics which are specifically intended to cause harm, or which cause harm in the process of completing them. Make no mistake about it—if you perform a ritual which benefits you, but which harms someone else, the magic is dark in nature."

He stopped for a moment and watched the class, clearly allowing them to digest the information he had just imparted to them. Harry glanced around as surreptitiously as he could and though Malfoy was nonchalant and unconcerned, most of the rest the class looked thoughtful. Even some of the Slytherins—who he would have expected to be as dark as Malfoy—appeared to be as thoughtful as the rest of the class. The information caused a whole new tangent in Harry thoughts—he had never truly had a lot of congress with the Slytherins, and he had as a result painted them largely with the same brush as Malfoy. There almost certainly was something to what the Headmaster had told him the previous day.

"Now, some of you may be wondering why I'm telling you this," Dumbledore continued. "There are several reasons. The first is because we have not been able to keep a Defense Professor for more than a year at a time; I'm not certain exactly what your professors have taught you.

"The second reason is that despite what our Minister is saying, our Mr. Potter did indeed witness the rebirth of the dark lord last year."

Harry blushed at the sudden scrutiny under which he found himself, as a rumble of noise broke out over the classroom. Surely everyone knew the story by now, but he had never truly told the tales of his adventures in such a public forum.

"Therefore, I want everyone to be aware of the seriousness of the situation," Dumbledore's voice once again cut through the discussion. "Everyone here is aware of the fact that Voldemort's Death Eaters have a propensity toward heavy usage of the dark arts."

The winces at the wizard's name caused Dumbledore to pause for a moment, before he continued in a slightly admonishing tone. "The fear to use a contrived name merely grants Voldemort a power to which he has no claim. It is only a name—not even the one with which he was born—and none of us should fear to say it.

"Now, to continue, I wish for everyone at this school to understand what we are dealing with when we oppose the dark arts. Everyone needs to be able to defend him or her self, whether you are able to strike back or not. The ability to defend until you are able to flee may keep you alive one day. Now, I believe we should begin as we have much to cover."

It was readily apparent that the Headmaster was not only a powerful wizard, but he also possessed a deep understanding of the dark arts, and extensive knowledge on how to combat them. Furthermore, he proved himself a gifted teacher as he patiently taught the students, showing a knack for demonstration, explanation, and coaxing the best out of every student in the room. Harry was amazed—if this man had been the Defense teacher throughout his time at the school, he was not certain how anyone could have avoided becoming gifted in the subject.

All in all, it was an enjoyable class, and far more illuminating than Harry had ever experienced before in Defense class. The only problem was that it was not destined to last—as Headmaster, he could hardly be expected to have the time to continue to teach the class indefinitely. Besides, he had already announced that the new Defense Professor would be arriving after winter holidays. Until then, they would just have to make the most of the opportunity to learn from one of the great leaders of their time.

The class continued apace, and before Harry knew it, they were nearing the end of the allotted time. For the last half of the class, Dumbledore had been pairing the members of the class off for some practice in dueling, and had even had several pairs face off in practice duels in front of the class where he could observe them

directly. He pointed out to the class the things that each duelist had done wrong, and which had been done right, attempting to get them to learn through practical experience.

He scanned the room, and his eyes rested on Harry and Hermione, and he smiled at the two of them. "Miss Granger, I have been watching you and Mr. Potter for some time now. Perhaps you could both come up here and demonstrate your abilities for the rest of the class?"

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione. He was not reluctant to do as the Headmaster had asked, except for the idea of being on display yet again. However, Fleur's words that he should strive to be exceptional filtered back to his mind at that moment and he decided that showing an example to everyone else was a good place to start.

"A Mudblood and a teacher's pet," a scoffing voice said softly behind him.

Harry was not about to deign to respond to the ferret—his opinion meant nothing after all—but the words had been spoken too loudly. It was clear that the Headmaster had heard him speak.

"Would you like to speak up, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore said, staring at the blond.

Malfoy colored slightly, but whether or not one was correct in attacking his credibility and capabilities, a lack of audacity was apparently not one of his traits.

"I said that you favor them," Malfoy responded. "It's obvious the way you fawn over Potter, and Granger is not much better. It's really quite sickening—neither is anything special."

"I was not aware that I had treated anyone in this class different than anyone else," responded Dumbledore with more than a hint of steel in his voice. "In fact, I distinctly remember Mr. Potter and Miss Granger instinctively grasping today's lesson with little help from me—I have only exchanged a few words with them the entire class."

His face turning slightly red, Malfoy's expression became tight, and he refused to respond to the Headmaster.

"Surely you must have some other reason for your words, Mr. Malfoy. Shall you not share them? Or perhaps you would prefer to be paired up with Mr. Potter or Miss Granger for our last practice duel of the day."

Malfoy sneered. "I was taught by my father. I have no doubt that I would be able to prevail over either of them with little trouble. There is no way that either of them could match up with me."

"In that case, you will be given a chance to back up your words," Dumbledore stated. He regarded Harry and Hermione for a moment, and Harry was hoping that Dumbledore would pick him—he would love a chance to take the prick down a peg or two. And best of all—he would not get into trouble for it!

At length, however, Dumbledore smiled at Hermione, and motioned her forward. "Miss Granger, I believe you would be perfect for this little demonstration, if you will oblige the class."

"The Mudblood?" Malfoy scoffed. "At least Potter might stand a chance—with her it will be over before it is even begun."

"That will be five points for the use of that disgusting word, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said harshly. "Do not repeat it again, as the next time I hear it from your mouth will cost you a week's detention."

Malfoy glared at the Headmaster, but somewhat out of character, he chose to remain silent. Instead, he grasped his wand tightly in his right hand and strode in to the middle of the classroom, turning his baleful glare on Hermione.

Of course, Hermione was hardly fazed by his display of bravado—she had faced him down many times before. It was well known—to all but Malfoy and his cronies—that the boy was ten parts bluster to one part competence. Regardless of Malfoy's misplaced confidence, Harry did not expect this practice duel to last more than a few moments, and had no doubt that Hermione would defeat him.

The two combatants faced off against one another with Dumbledore taking his position as referee between them. "Remember, no questionable curses," he said as he looked pointedly at Malfoy.

"Your goal is to disable so your opponent is no longer able to continue."

He looked across at each combatant, confirming their acceptance of the rules, before he stepped back and cast a large shield charm which surrounded Hermione and Malfoy, and protected the rest of the students observing the match. After a moment, sparks issued from his wand, signaling the start of the match.

"Bombarda!" Malfoy yelled, immediately going on the offensive.

If he had expected the match to end quickly in his favor, he was to be disappointed as Hermione merely shifted gracefully to one side, avoiding the hex. In quick succession, she had cast a shield charm over herself before she shouted, "Stupefy!" in response to Malfoy's bludgeoning hex.

Hastily, Malfoy cast a shield charm and responded with a quick, "Diffindo!"

Once again, Hermione stepped to the side, while her wand moved fluidly. "Expeliarmus! Stupefy! Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!"

The hexes rolled off her tongue in quick succession, causing Malfoy to work his wand desperately in an attempt to deflect or shield them all. The first he managed to dodge, while the two stunning hexes impacted on his shield. The body bind curse, however, blew through the remains of Malfoy's shield, and hit him in the chest. Immediately, Malfoys' arms and legs snapped together and he toppled to the floor, losing his grip on his wand which rolled away from him.

The look on the boy's face was almost comical. He was enraged at being defeated by a mere "Mudblood," though he also displayed equal parts shame and an almost malevolent, murderous anger. Cat calls and whistles sounded as Dumbledore lowered the shield and congratulated Hermione, all of which she accepted with a bow and a smile. Not once did she even glance in Malfoy's direction, though Harry himself would undoubtedly have taunted the boy with the ease of his defeat.

Stepping over to the prone blond, Dumbledore's quick finite ended his confinement. The boy immediately jumped to his feet, his fists clenched with rage as he glared belligerently at Hermione. The girl in question paid him no notice, however—she merely peered at him

disinterestedly. Her friends, however, were not taking any chances; Harry stepped forward almost in concert with Ron and Neville to flank her, each directing a glare at the Malfoy scion.

"Did you have something you wished to say, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore inquired. But though his expression was placid—genial, almost—his voice was hard and demanded attention.

Malfoy scowled once again before he stalked over to pick up his wand and, retrieving it, returned to stand next to his friends, who perhaps appeared more stunned than they had a right to be.

"Now, can anyone tell me exactly what went wrong for Mr. Malfoy and, conversely, what Miss Granger did right?"

"Malfoy was overconfident," said Harry with a contemptuous glance at his nemesis. "He assumed that he was better than Hermione and believed he would win easily."

"Not that the ponce would have beaten her anyway," said Ron in a stage whisper.

Suppressed snorts and giggles broke out all over the room, prompting an even deeper scowl to appear on Malfoy's face. Though he betrayed no outward response to Ron's comment, Dumbledore's eyes appeared to twinkle even more than was their wont.

"That will be two points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley," he stated. "It is not very kind to taunt one who has been bested by a superior opponent."

Harry, who was watching the git's response, noted the flaring of his nostrils and the narrowing of his eyes as he was clearly affronted at hearing Hermione be referred to as "superior" to him. He kept his temper this time, however, merely glaring balefully at Hermione, Harry, and Dumbledore alternately.

"But in essence, Mr. Potter is correct. Mr. Malfoy did not take Miss Granger seriously, and paid the price in the end.

"Now, can anyone point out anything that Miss Granger did correctly which allowed her to win the match?"

It was far too short for that, Harry thought with some sarcasm. And indeed, it seemed as though the others in the class were having some difficulty coming up with something that Hermione had done correctly, other than to put the arrogant ponce in his place.

"Her spells were cast quickly?" Susan Bones ventured hesitantly.

"Very good, Miss Bones," answered Dumbledore. "Once Miss Granger dodged the first spell and shielded herself, she immediately went on the offensive and cast several spells in succession. It is very difficult to attack someone else if you are consistently trying to defend against the other person's attack.

"Let this be a lesson to you all," he continued, his manner serious and stern. "You should never take an enemy lightly, whether that enemy is the most powerful wizard alive or the greenest first year in the school.

"Furthermore, I am aware that part of Mr. Malfoy's mistake was to consider Miss Granger inferior simply due to their respective backgrounds." By now, Dumbledore was gazing directly at Malfoy, his tone and mien that of the most accomplished wizard of the age. Malfoy did not respond, however—he contented himself with glaring back at the Headmaster with defiance written all over his face.

"Let me be rightly understood," said Dumbledore in a commanding tone of voice, "your background, specifically who your parents were, and how long magic has been in your family is irrelevant. Some of the most powerful and capable wizards and witches I have ever known were Muggleborn, and conversely, I have known some extremely capable Purebloods. All any of you should worry about is your own studies and your own abilities. In the future, I expect everyone in this—and every other—class to show the proper respect to everyone else who attends. Do not underestimate your opponents or fall into the trap of believing you are better because of your background. In the end, we are all human, regardless of whom our parents were."

The class broke up very quickly after that, the conversation about what had just happened was animated. Harry, along with his other friends and year mates, crowded around Hermione congratulating her for defeating the arrogant Pureblood. Malfoy stormed from the



room in a rage, pulling his cronies along behind him. A few of the other Slytherins who were not normally considered a part of his clique stood watching the events with some calculation evident on their faces.

Harry ignored them for the most part. He was excessively proud of Hermione for the way she had handled herself in the duel.

"Good show, Hermione!" said Ron, enthusiastically catching her up in a hug.

"Thank you, Ronald," replied Hermione, once he had stepped away. "He's not exactly a challenge—third year proved that."

That of course garnered some attention, and Hermione was forced to recount the events of that year, where she bloodied Malfoy's nose, which in turn prompted more conversation and laughter. It was not untrue to say that by the time the rest of the fifth years had made their way from the classroom that whatever credibility or dignity Malfoy still possessed was in tatters. Harry doubted that anyone would ever see the arrogant ponce as anything other than a whiny little Pureblood who rode on the coattails of his bully of a father.

The exit from the classroom kept the Pureblood ponce at the forefront of everyone's mind, as he had appeared to have waited there in ambush to confront the Gryffindors as they exited the room. Once Hermione had stepped into the hallway he placed himself directly in her path and glared aggressively at her, waving a finger in her direction.

"You filthy little Mudblood!" he hissed. "You will pay for raising your wand to me, you disgusting little whore!"

"Like I paid after I knocked you on your arse in third year?" Hermione asked with disdain. "You've always held a higher opinion of yourself than your abilities ever warranted."

"You will not speak to me!" Malfoy snapped, his wand held out in a threatening manner. "You come from a stock of Muggles and other filth, and are not even worthy to speak the name Malfoy."

Almost as one, the Gryffindors jumped to action, their wands held in their hands, pointed at the Slytherins who had taken position behind

their leader. Harry held his wand pointed at Draco's face, and glared at the blond with pure loathing.

"Go ahead, ferret," he snarled. "Give me a reason to pay you back for all the misery you have caused since I've come to Hogwarts."

By this time, the remaining Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs—many of whom were members of the Defense Club—had taken flanking positions to support the Gryffindors. The Slytherins—of whom only Pansy, Millicent, Crabbe and Goyle were supporting the Malfoy heir—were decidedly outnumbered and some were looking uneasily at the array of wands pointed in their direction. Malfoy, however, was focused solely on Hermione, murder evident in his eyes.

"You're nothing but a jumped-up Half-blood, Potty," Malfoy sneered. "You and the Mudblood here—"

"That will be enough!" Dumbledore's voice boomed as he exited the Defense classroom, a worried Padma Patil at his heels. "All wands will be lowered immediately!"

Almost as one, wands fell to the users' sides, as the Headmaster's voice commanded respect and obedience.

"Wands are tools used for the focusing of one's magic, and should never be raised in anger in the hallways of a school," Dumbledore stated, while moving between the antagonists. "For each student who had their wand out, that will be a point deduction—do not ever let me see such a scene in the hallways of Hogwarts again."

Though there were some groans and muffled protests, no one spoke out loud, and Harry could not but admit that it was a fair punishment, regardless of who started the fight, or for what reason—belligerence or protection—their wands were out.

Dumbledore's attention was immediately on the Malfoy heir. "Mr. Malfoy, not fifteen minutes after I reprimanded you for using that vile insult and told you the consequences of its use, I hear you saying it once again. That will be a fifteen point deduction, and a week detention with Mr. Filch. I advise you to avoid repeating it in the future, as the punishment will be much more severe."

The only response to the Headmaster's words was a tightening of the Slytherin's lips, and his continued belligerent glare. Apparently Dumbledore took his lack of response as all the acknowledgement he needed. After his words to Harry the previous day about his concern about Malfoy's ability to change, it was apparently the best he could expect.

"Now," Dumbledore's voice was quieter and more reasonable, "you are all dismissed. But you shall all remember that the school is no place for a pitched battle. If this behavior continues, suspensions and expulsions may result."

As soon as he was able, Malfoy turned on his heel and stalked away, his friends following close behind. Harry exchanged glances with his friends and turned to walk toward the Great Hall and dinner. They had not gone two steps before the Headmaster's voice interrupted, asking Harry to stay behind.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore began after the rest of the fifth years had filed away, "I understand you were protecting your friend and that Mr. Malfoy was the instigator, but I must ask you to exercise a little more restraint. The things that you are learning in Defense class, and that you are teaching in your club, are worthy and necessary for you to defend yourself, but equally important is the lesson of knowing when to use your knowledge, and when to avoid a fight."

Harry nodded. "I understand, Headmaster. But if Malfoy presses and starts something, we will finish it. And he will not like the result."

Sighing, the Headmaster nodded and steered Harry toward the Great Hall with a grandfatherly pat on his shoulders. "I understand, Harry. I do perceive the path which Mr. Malfoy treads, as I told you during our discussion yesterday. You and your friends have done an admirable job in keeping your tempers and not escalating this rivalry any more than it already is. I must ask for your patience as much as possible. Mr. Malfoy was intensely irate today, and I fear I must share the blame for the situation. I had meant merely to illustrate and teach a lesson, and I fear that the enmity has only deepened."

"It would have anyway," was Harry's response. "Malfoy has been nothing but trouble the first time I met him on the train. We won't start anything with him or with his friends, but we won't sit back and allow him to bully us either."

"Understandable. I appreciate your continued restraint, and request that you let me, or one of the other professors know if the situation deteriorates any further. I will leave you to dinner with your friends. I fear that there are matters which demand my attention."

Harry watched Dumbledore walk away, reflecting that his words showed much wisdom. Instinctively, however, he knew that no one would ever be able to reach Malfoy. He would end up a Death Eater, and as such, if Harry had his way, he would end up dead, or in Azkaban. No other fate would do, otherwise he would continue to be a menace and a danger. No one would be allowed to hurt any of Harry's friends. He would not allow it.

Fleur left her class that afternoon with no knowledge of what was happening in and after Defense, but with problems of her own. Upon leaving her last class of the day, she returned to the common room in the company of her seventh year friends. Knowing that Defense would run late that day, she decided to do a little research for an upcoming charms project before meeting Harry for dinner.

The library was quiet, as usual, and given that it was the hour before dinner, it was fairly lightly populated, most of the students apparently choosing to use the time for leisure, rather than study. Fleur knew that later in the evening, the room would most likely be busier as students got down to the business of studying and preparing for the year end exams. Shrugging her shoulders slightly, Fleur made her way through the library, and after finding two books which she had specifically wished to investigate, she made her way to the table which Hermione always used when she was in the library, and began flipping through the books, looking for the pertinent information she required.

It was understandable why Hermione preferred this particular table, Fleur mused as she scanned the books. It was out of the way and quiet, even by the library's standards, and it was also close to a wide variety of subjects and advanced spell books. It was also quite close to the restricted section, should one have a pass for that area of the library, and very convenient. Another benefit to that particular table was the fact that it was quite large and many friends could sit there and study together quite easily. Trust the bookish Hermione to find such a treasure.

Having only sat at the table for a few moments, Fleur was surprised when she heard the sudden creaking of one of the chairs. She looked up, startled, to see Roger grinning at her.

"Hello, Roger," greeted Fleur. She plastered a weak smile on her face and tried to hide the distinct lack of enthusiasm she felt at his presence—how successfully, she was not entirely certain.

Appearing to take no notice at her rather lukewarm greeting, Roger's smile became even larger. "Hey, Fleur—fancy meeting you here."

"I just thought I'd do a bit of research before dinner," Fleur replied

She hoped he would take the hint and leave, or at the very least sit quietly while she searched through the books for the information she needed. It was not to be, however, as Roger appeared to be keen to engage her in conversation—more, even, than normal.

"So what are you working on?"

"I just wanted to find a little more information for our charms assignment," was Fleur's response as she once again looked down into the book.

"Right, the charms assignment," replied Roger with a knowing smile. "How is it coming, by the way?"

Fleur sighed and closed the book, thinking to herself that it would be coming along much better if a certain young man of her acquaintance would leave her alone. "Still planning and researching, but I think it's coming together. How is yours?"

A look of studied nonchalance fell over Roger's face. "I'm getting there. But I was wondering if you wanted to combine our projects—work on it together."

Frowning slightly, Fleur wondered what his purpose for this suggestion was. After all, Professor Flitwick had specifically stated that it was to be an individual project. And as it was to count against the grading of her NEWTs at the end of the year, Fleur was not exactly willing to chance having her grade lowered because she did not follow the professor's instructions.

"I don't think that would be a good idea, Roger," she stated as gently as she could. "You heard Professor Flitwick—this is supposed to be an individual effort."

Though she thought she detected a flash of something resembling annoyance in his expression, Roger masked it well. He just smiled and moved his chair closer to hers, while reaching out to take her hand in one of his own.

"I'm not suggesting we cheat," he said while stroking the back of her hand. "I'm just saying we should work on it together. You know—to come up with ideas, check each other's work, support each other—two heads are better than one, you know."

Shocked, Fleur pulled her hand from his grasp and glared at him. "That's rather inappropriate, Roger."

"There's nothing inappropriate about it," Roger replied, reaching out to take her hand again. He bestowed a kiss upon its back, and once again shuffled his seat a little closer to her. "To be honest, the studying time is just a fringe benefit. I'd like us to get closer again like we did last year. Maybe we could pick up where we left off."

He bent his head, apparently intending to kiss her, when Fleur stood and once again ripped her hand from his grasp. "Roger, this is completely inappropriate behavior. I would ask you to stop."

"Why?" Roger asked, standing and facing her with a half smile on his face. "Why should it be inappropriate for two people who have feelings for one another to show their affection?"

"I think you are overstating my feelings," responded Fleur rather forcefully. "No such feelings exist, and even if they did, it appears to have escaped your attention that I am now betrothed."

At this, Roger's face twisted into an ugly sneer. "Betrothed to a boy with delusions of grandeur—someone who is undeservedly held up on a pedestal and lauded, though he has really done nothing to deserve it."

Stunned by the vitriol in Roger's voice, Fleur gazed back at him with some astonishment. Roger had never given her any indication in the

past that he disliked Harry, or that he felt the way his words suggested.

"It appears to me that you don't know Harry," Fleur said with a shake of her head. "He is not as you said, and he would be the first to brush off the fame of surviving the Killing Curse as something he had no control over."

"That doesn't matter," said Roger, once again stepping toward her with his hand extended. Fleur instinctively moved back out of his immediate area, not wishing to give him any leverage to use against her.

"Come, Fleur—we had it good last year. I know you felt it too. Why shouldn't we have a little fun and romance together while we're young? There's nothing tying you down now."

"I'm betrothed!" Fleur snapped. "That ties me down."

"But Potter is always with that Granger girl," Roger wheedled. "Who knows what he's getting up to with her all the time—why shouldn't you have the same opportunity?"

"I trust Harry and Hermione," was Fleur's response. "Besides, I think you are grossly exaggerating any relationship you and I might have had. We had one date at the Yule Ball, which I did not find enjoyable in the slightest. Even if Harry had not entered my life, I certainly would not be pining for you."

Once again Roger's face twisted in a sneer, which reminded Fleur very much of a similar expression she had often seen on the face of a certain Pureblood bigot. "You owe me, Fleur!" he said while jabbing a finger at her pointedly. "I know it was going so well when we left the Yule Ball, but then you had to trick me with your Veela powers and leave me alone in the garden."

"I owe you nothing," snapped Fleur. "Whatever you saw between us was nothing more than your overactive imagination. I'm happy with Harry. I'm sorry, but you were never in the picture."

"In that case, I hope you're happy with the little fame monger," Roger spat. "He's just the right type for someone like you." Roger laughed unpleasantly. "He wanders around with you and that other

girl in a daze, and even when he holds your hand he doesn't seem to know what to do with it. Enjoy your time with your little puppy—I think soon enough you'll regret your decision."

With that, Roger stalked from the library, leaving a bewildered Fleur struggling to understand what had just happened. Was it all because of jealousy, or what had happened between them after the ball, or was it something else which was fueling Roger's resentment? He had never given any indication of these feelings before, and the accusations he had hurled concerning Harry were worrisome, though Fleur knew that she should not give them any credence in the slightest.

Though she was comfortable with Harry, a part of her had been a little concerned with the slowness at which their relationship had been developing. Perhaps it was time to push their relationship a little? Fleur had no answers, unfortunately; she knew they were both exploring their relationship and their new status as best they could.

His accusations regarding Harry she dismissed as nothing more than jealousy. She knew Harry, and she knew that he was not as Roger had stated. Harry was a good person, and she knew she would never need to worry about Harry trying his best to make her happy. They just needed to find their way together.

Having calmed slightly due to her thoughts, Fleur gathered her things together and returned the books to their places on the shelves. She would talk to Harry some time in the near future about their relationship. Together they would figure it out.

A/N:

1. Finally it's out. Been having some laptop problems recently, and I'm just about ready to toss this thing through the window. When IBM used to own the PC line, the machines were pricey, but generally reliable. Now that the line has been sold to Lenovo, they are still pricey, but not worth the dynamite it would take to blow them to hell.

2. I will be ready to post the next chapter, but after that it's anyone's guess. I will try to keep ahead of the game, but I'll state right now that I may have to take a short hiatus to try to build up a bit of a



cushion again. There's just been too much going on, even before the technology problems started cropping up.

3. Well, there's my statement on the whole intent versus inherently dark argument. While I certainly agree that intent is a determining factor in whether a piece of magic is being used for good or not, JKR was clear that there is some magic which has no good use. I've always thought that was logical, considering the way she set it up. Can Horcruxes be anything other than dark? The unforgiveables and certain other magics seem to fall into that category as well.

4. To me, Malfoy has never been anything but a want-to-be bully who does nothing but ape his father and ride on his coattails. I think it's an absolute travesty that the Malfoys were not made to pay for their actions in the books. That will not happen in this story, I promise. This set back at Hermione's hands will ultimately make him more dangerous, though...

5. I'll let you all guess what Roger is up to. Is he merely a spurned would-be lover, a stalker, or is something more sinister going on? Sorry, but you'll just have to wait and see.

## Chapter 22 – A Change in Stance

That evening at dinner came an announcement which was unexpected, though it was certainly welcome to many of those listening—especially the young women attending the school. Harry and his friends had just arrived in the Great Hall, and were lounging at the house table discussing the events of and immediately following Defense class, not to mention directing sly smirks at the still enraged Malfoy scion. A single glance at the blonde's ruddy complexion and implacable glare showed clearly that he still had not managed to contain his anger. To the surprise of the assembled students Dumbledore stood from his spot at the head table and motioned for silence.

"I hope you have all enjoyed your classes today," he began when the noise had quieted. "We have had some trying times at Hogwarts recently, and I hope that things will now improve. I wish everyone to know that I will do my best to ensure that you will all have the knowledge you require when the next Defense Professor finally arrives in January. Until then, I truly relish the opportunity to teach. As you all know, I have not spent much time in a classroom in many years, and I find myself once again enjoying the experience.

"But enough of my rambling," he continued with a benevolent smile. "The true reason for my boring you with my overly wordy lecture is to inform everyone that we have decided to introduce a new tradition to our yearly activities at Hogwarts."

Murmurs broke out as the students began to speculate on what this new tradition could possibly be. Harry and his friends merely exchanged glances and turned their attention back to the Headmaster who was watching the students with some affection evident on his countenance. The man was at heart an educator, who truly seemed to enjoy his time with the students.

"We have decided that since the Yule Ball last year was such a success, we will make it a tradition every year at Hogwarts."

At Dumbledore's words, the hall once again burst into noisy murmurs as the students absorbed this news. Looking around, Harry noticed that most of his classmates seemed to be excited about the idea, ready and eager for a night of dancing, listening to music and, most importantly, impressing those of the other sex. He would also

have had to be blind to have missed the speculative glances which were directed at him from all over the hall, though most of those glances turned sour as they turned to the radiant blond sitting by his side.

Fleur seemed to be taking the announcement with a certain amount of eagerness—no doubt she was happy to put the memories of the last Yule Ball to rest in favor of some more pleasant memories with her betrothed. She shot a glance at Harry, her eyebrows raised in question, to which he responded with a smirk and a nod. The expression of smugness which came over her face at their little exchange caused the other girls' faces to turn even sourer, but Harry did not care. He would not need to worry about his date and put off asking someone until the last second this time—no, this time he would attend with the most beautiful girl in the school on his arm. In fact, now that he thought of it, a ghost of an idea began to form in his mind...

"As with last year's ball," Dumbledore continued, interrupting his thoughts, "This ball, and all future balls, will be open to fourth years and up. Those in first, second, and third years will have their own party in another part of the castle, though they may attend the Yule Ball if they are asked by someone who is old enough to attend.

"This ball will be held on the final Friday of the year, and you will return to your homes the day after on the express. Please remember that there will be a Hogsmeade weekend the week before the ball, so if there is any finery which needs to be procured, that will be the day to do so."

Dumbledore smiled with some amusement at the students before he clapped his hands together once and gestured to the tables. "Now, I believe I have kept you from your dinner for quite long enough."

The volume in the hall once again rose as the Headmaster took his seat and the students began eating their dinner and talking all at once. The discussion around Harry's place was animated, with the girls generally being excited at the prospect of another dance, while the boys were of mixed emotions. Ron particularly seemed to be reacting in much the same manner as he had the previous year, though Harry did notice him sneak a few looks in Hermione's direction. If Hermione had accepted his request to date he would have had a date already, but as that had not happened, he was

clearly a little put out that she had rejected him. Ron had made a lot of progress, but he seemed as though he had still not completely come to terms with the reality of the situation.

Knowing that his own feelings on the occasion were in marked contrast to what Ron was feeling and not wishing to give the touchy redhead a reason to be jealous, Harry avoided looking at his friend, instead concentrating on another one of his friends. Since the announcement of the ball, Neville had sat with the rest of the group without adding much to the conversation. Neville's expression was pensive and thoughtful, but his frequent glances at the Ravenclaw table were both telling, and somewhat amusing. It appeared as though the past few months which had pointed toward a budding romance between the shy Gryffindor and a certain ethereal Ravenclaw were about to be proved as fact rather than speculation.

Smiling to himself, Harry took his attention away from his friend. He hoped Neville was able to gather the courage necessary to ask Luna to the ball, but he had himself to think of at that moment. It was time to make a splash.

Plotting, Harry waited until he—and his target—had finished their dinner. As the time neared for them to return to the common room for the evening, he abruptly stood and turned to face Fleur. In an extravagant manner he knelt on one knee and gathered Fleur's hand in his own and, noting her slightly surprised but amused smile, he returned it with a grin of his own before he spoke.

"Miss Delacour, as the most beautiful girl in the room and as my fair betrothed, I would be honored if you would deign to accompany me to the Yule Ball." Harry extended his wand and with a flourish, conjured a yellow rose with a red highlights at the end of the petals, remembering a magazine of his aunt's which had listed the meanings of various flowers. "Please accept this rose as a token of my esteem and my joy that we have been brought together."

Fleur blushed slightly and reached out to accept the rose. Bringing it close to her face, she inhaled the scent deeply, before favoring him with a dazzling smile. "I would love to attend the ball with you, kind sir. I thank you for choosing me out of all the girls you could have favored with your attention."

"No, my dear," Harry continued in an exaggeratedly gallant manner. "With such radiance before me, I could never even conceive of taking anyone else to the ball. I will appear as nothing more than a poor country cousin next to your brilliance."

Smirking, Fleur leaned toward Hermione, who was gazing at Harry in shock, as though she did not know him. "He's definitely a keeper, Hermione," she said with a little laugh. "I'm glad you trained him so well."

"I certainly didn't teach him that," Hermione murmured in response.

"I am sure you will acquit yourself quite well indeed, Mr. Potter," said Fleur, turning her attention back to Harry. "I await the ball with breathless anticipation."

Bowing, Harry kissed Fleur's hand before he stood and pulled her to her feet, all to the thunderous applause which burst over the Great Hall. Smirking, Harry turned and bowed slightly in all directions, noting the cheering, and the now softened faces of many of the girls who had previously been glaring at Fleur. There was nothing like a hint of romance to soften the demeanor of any girl.

In passing, he also noted the disdainful sneer etched on the still-furious face of one poncy ferret. Harry made it a special point to flip a jaunty salute in Malfoy's direction, gleefully noting the haughty glare he received in response, before he took Fleur's hand and placed it on his arm, and guided her from the room.

Hermione, who had joined them and was walking at Harry's other side, frowned and peered at Harry. "Who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?"

Smirking, Harry shrugged once. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time," he said blandly. "I've spent every moment of my existence in the magical world wishing I wasn't famous. I figure there's nothing I can do about it, so I may as well use it to my advantage."

His answer appeared to bring Hermione up short, but after a moment she nodded and grinned at Fleur. "There, Fleur. You see? He's growing up all by himself."

Laughing, Fleur grasped Harry's arm a little tighter. "He'll do just fine, Hermione."

She directed a pointed look at Hermione, which in response the brunette flushed a little. But before Harry could give some thought as to what was passing between the two girls, he heard a voice calling for them to wait. Harry stopped and turned to see a young, redhead girl approaching.

Susan Bones gazed at him with a certain admiration, before she laughed and addressed him. "Smooth, Potter—really smooth. You could have had just about any girl in the hall falling at your feet had you asked them instead of Fleur."

"Well, what can I say?" Harry asked with a smirk. "Some of us have it, and others—"

He stopped suddenly as his two companions, acting in concert, smacked him in the back of his head, prompting a delighted laugh from Susan.

"Methinks someone has an exaggerated opinion of his own charm," Hermione said to Fleur.

"Perhaps," responded Fleur with a grin at Harry, who was now rubbing the back of his head and grumbling. "I can take his charm as long as he directs it at me."

"What can we do for you, Susan?" Harry asked, deciding it was best to simply ignore his friends' banter.

"Umm... Can I have a minute of your time?" Susan Bones asked, suddenly appearing nervous.

Though he did not know Susan well at all, Harry knew her to be a bright and pleasant sort of girl. She had red hair—though more of an orange color, unlike the Weasley family's fiery locks—blue eyes, and was of average stature, and though she was perhaps a trifle too pleasantly plump for Harry's tastes, she was not unattractive. Moreover, the way she had handled herself in Defense class with Umbridge—not to mention the few times he had seen her in the Defense Club—told him that she was competent and talented. In

addition, though they had never talked much, she had always appeared to him to be a rather friendly person.

"Sure, Susan, what would you like?"

Susan glanced around the hall and gestured toward an empty anteroom. "Can we step inside that room for a moment?"

Intrigued, Harry motioned for her to lead the way. They trooped into the room and stopped as Susan turned to face them. Now that Harry had a chance to stop and look, his earlier impression of her nervousness was confirmed in the way she was wringing her hands and peering at them uncertainly. It was something he had never seen from her before.

"Harry," she began, the slight quaver in her voice reinforcing his observations. "I have someone I'd like to introduce to you. Someone who is interested in joining the club," she finished in a rush.

At Harry's raised eyebrow, she scowled and fixed him with a determined glare. "Well, you did say that we were welcome to pass the word to those we considered trustworthy. And besides, I figured that with Umbridge gone that secrecy was not really much of an issue any more."

"That's true I guess," Harry admitted. "Who is it?"

Susan's indignation faded and once again a slight sense of nervousness appeared to settle over her. "Well, she's a friend of mine—her family and mine have been friends for years. She said that she has some other friends and housemates who are also interested in attending."

"And who is it?" Harry asked, his suspicions once again coming to the fore.

Appearing to come to a decision, Susan squared her shoulders and declared resolutely, "Daphne Greengrass."

Surprised, Harry's eyebrow once again rose at the girl's statement. Of course he knew who Daphne was—the year groups at Hogwarts were small enough that it was easy to remember everyone's name. His shock was more due to the fact that it was difficult to believe that

anyone would invite a Slytherin to the club, knowing in general what that house stood for—and to a large extent, who they stood for.

Harry was about to respond in such a manner, when a snippet from his conversation with the Headmaster the previous evening entered his mind.

"I would caution you against painting the entire house with the same brush."

Mulling it over in his mind, Harry wondered about the Headmaster's statement, and his own prejudices against the house of the snake. Had his early experiences with Malfoy jaded him against the entire house? Were they all like Malfoy and his father? Could he trust any of them to watch his back and oppose Voldemort?

The obvious answer to his questions was, of course, that yes, he had allowed Malfoy to prejudice him against Slytherin whether his bias was warranted or not. All throughout his first four years and part of the fifth, the Pureblood ponce had gone out of his way to proclaim how superior he was, and how inferior he considered others to be and Harry, not truly having much to do with any of Malfoy's housemates, had subconsciously painted them all with the same brush. Was there some good to be found in Slytherin house? Of the answer to that question he was not certain—he did not have enough experience with them to come to any conclusion, after all—but perhaps for the first time, he considered the question without resorting to the biases of the past. As Dumbledore had so astutely noted, not all Gryffindors were noble and good. It stood to reason that not all Slytherins could be dark, bigoted supporters of Voldemort either.

With this new outlook in mind, Harry focused his attention back on Susan. "Do you trust Daphne?"

"As I said, she's been a friend for a long time. In fact, with my aunt being so busy at the DMLE, I often will stay several weeks with the Greengrasses during the summer. Daphne's mum and my mum were best friends at Hogwarts."

"And you mentioned some others," Harry prompted. "Do you know who they are, or how many? Are we to be overrun by Slytherin students eager to improve their defense skills?"



Susan ignored Harry's feeble attempts at humor—perhaps wisely, Harry reflected in a rueful manner. "I would imagine that her little sister Astoria and her friend Tracey Davis would be involved, but other than them, I don't know who else she has in mind—if anyone."

"I think we should meet them first," said Hermione. "Slytherin house doesn't exactly have a sterling reputation and I think that we should get some indication from them why they want to be involved."

An indignant expression appeared on Susan's face, but her words were neatly preempted by a conciliatory Fleur. "We don't want to imply your friends aren't trustworthy, Susan. We just want to meet them for ourselves—Slytherin in general has not been kind to Harry, nor have they been welcoming to Hermione or me."

"Besides, what do you think the reaction would be to a bunch of Slytherins suddenly walking in on our meeting?"

Grudgingly Susan allowed both Hermione and Fleur's points in a tight nod. "So, when did you want to meet them?"

"Tomorrow after dinner?" Harry suggested. "Wednesday is our next meeting. We could talk to them and if they check out, we could introduce them to everyone then."

"Thanks, Harry," Susan said, clearly relieved that the discussion had gone so well. After a few more moments in which they arranged a time and place to meet the Slytherins the next day she exited the room.

Harry exchanged glances with his two female companions. "Well, what do you think?"

Grimacing, Hermione said, "While all my experience with Slytherin says that they can't be trusted, I must admit I don't really know Daphne and Tracey. They've always seemed to be pretty aloof in the past, but that could just be because we don't know them."

"Or it could be because of the whole 'house of the ambitious and cunning' thing," Harry retorted sourly.

"There isn't much we can do but wait and see," Fleur interjected. "For what it's worth, I think you made the right choice. The only thing you can do now is talk to them and see what they have to say."

Deep in thought, Harry nodded his assent before leading the girls from the room. While he knew that speaking with Daphne's group was the right thing to do, a part of him wished that he could just go on believing that all Slytherins were evil and leave it at that. That outlook was, at the very least, much less complicated.

Daphne Greengrass was a pretty young woman with a wealth of lustrous black hair and startling deep blue eyes. She was of average height and a slim build, and she carried herself with confidence and poise. And as she sat in the empty classroom gazing at Harry, he wondered what type of person she truly was.

To Harry, she had always seemed quiet and uncommunicative, though he had to admit that he had, at times, witnessed her in moments when she had been open and even engaging with her friends. Her quiet persona was possibly due to the fact that she was guarded in dealings with those she did not know, or it could be because her reticence was simply due to shyness—Harry was not certain. Her frank gaze at that moment, however, seemed to suggest that she was not shy of him. Instead, her gaze was confident and assured.

By contrast, her friend Tracey Davis was dumpy and plain, her face framed by limp, mousy brown hair which was gathered haphazardly into a messy ponytail, though several strands had escaped their confinement. Tracey, Harry knew, was garrulous and outgoing, if her loud peals of laughter and constantly chatty demeanor he had observed was to be believed.

Of the others in the room, Harry knew even less. Blaise Zabini was of African descent, and was a tall, broad shouldered boy in Harry's year, with short cropped black hair. His taciturnity was legendary, to the extent that not even those of his own house knew much about him. He was considered to be an antisocial loner, who was disparaged by Malfoy and his crew almost as much as they disparaged Harry himself. Whether this had ever bothered the boy was completely unknown—he had the most impenetrable poker face Harry had ever seen on another person.

The final three were even more of an enigma. Astoria Greengrass was a younger copy of her older sister, the only major difference between the two being her much lighter shade of ice blue eyes. Nigel Johnson was a seventh year who Harry had only noticed a few times in passing, while Greta White was a fourth year, pretty and blond, but with a sneering, superior expression of which Malfoy would almost have been envious.

The six sat at various desks around the empty classroom, holding themselves aloof from the three Gryffindors and one Hufflepuff, but Harry had to suppress a smile at the thought of the proud and haughty Slytherins appearing before him like some supplicant pilgrims. Slytherins, by their very nature, never did something without there being some benefit for themselves, their families, or their house. Harry was intrigued to discover exactly what these six felt they could gain.

Susan handled the introduction of Daphne to the three Gryffindors, who then proceeded to introduce the others. Once the formalities had been concluded, they got down to business.

"We understand that you have started a Defense Club and would like to inquire about joining," Daphne said without preamble. It seemed that she had been appointed spokesman for the group.

"We have," Harry confirmed simply.

"Then how does one go about joining?" demanded Tracey.

"It's an invitation only club," said Harry. "In response, I would inquire why you would want to join a Defense Club run by a bunch of Gryffindors."

"The fact that we want to learn more about Defense isn't enough?" asked Daphne.

"In a world where Voldemort is on the loose and certain members of Slytherin house openly support him it is most certainly not enough."

At the wincing the use of the Dark Lord's name produced, Harry scowled. "Look, if you are to join our group, you will need to learn not to flinch every time someone mentions the name Voldemort. It's

just a stupid name he made up because he doesn't like his Muggle name. Ask Fleur if you want to know what it means."

"I know enough French to translate it, thank you very much," said Daphne somewhat primly. Then a contemplative expression stole over her face and she regarded him openly. "You still claim that the... dark lord has returned do you?"

"It's the truth." Harry shrugged. "Why would I claim anything else? I swore an oath on my magic at the first meeting of the club, so if you don't believe me, ask anyone who was there."

The members of Slytherin house all shared a look before they turned their attention back to Harry. "In that case, it seems like we have all the more reason to learn how to defend ourselves."

At Harry's skeptical expression, Daphne threw her hands up in the air. "Honestly, Potter, I know you've had problems with certain members of our house, but not everyone in Slytherin is named 'Malfoy,' and not all of us stand for what he stands for. Not all Slytherins are slimy Death Eater wannabes."

"So you're not in Malfoy's camp?"

"Do we look like we're in Malfoy's camp?" demanded Tracey. "Think back, Potter—have you ever seen anyone here associating with Malfoy? Have any of us ever given you the grief that he gives you?"

"You haven't," Harry admitted. "In fact, I hardly know any of you."

"Then give us a chance," said Blaise, speaking for the first time. As a matter of fact, Harry could not say definitively that he had ever even heard the other boy's voice before now—he was that enigmatic.

Turning, Harry raised his eyebrows at the three girls. Fleur and Hermione said nothing, but Susan huffed in some impatience.

"I can certainly vouch for Daphne and Astoria, Harry. The others I don't know well, but I'm sure Daphne would not have brought them here if she didn't trust them."

"Really, it's their word that we have to take into account," Hermione said. She then turned to look at Harry. "What do you think?"

"I'm inclined to allow them to participate," said Harry, eyeing the Slytherins, thinking once again about Dumbledore's words. "If we start imagining everyone to be aligned with Voldemort, we'll end up paranoid, jumping at every shadow which crosses our paths."

"But we do have to be careful," cautioned Fleur.

"Agreed," said Harry evenly. "But I'm not going down that path."

"Would it help if we were to swear an oath?" asked Daphne in a dry tone of voice.

"I hardly think that is required," responded Hermione. She was regarding the other girl with an appraising eye, though Harry was uncertain whether it was because she knew something of Daphne, or something else. "I think your word will suffice for the time being. You will have to sign a register, which prevents you from betraying the club, though admittedly with Umbridge gone it's not as big an issue as it used to be."

"What happens if we do betray the club?" Daphne asked. Watching her body language and the casual way in which she asked the question Harry suspected that her question was based on nothing more than curiosity. Still, it would do to be watchful of these Slytherins for a time—he did not really know or trust them as of yet.

"Let's just say that it would be unpleasant," said Hermione without any further explanation. Up to this point, Hermione had been very evasive when questioned about what exactly she had done to the register, not even sharing it with her closest friends.

"Then how was I able to talk to Daphne about it?" asked Susan. She appeared somewhat perplexed.

"I based the ward on intent and actual harm," Hermione admitted slowly, clearly not wishing still to give up much information. "I won't share exactly what I did with it, as I don't want someone to come up with a way to circumvent it, but in a very basic sense, since you were not intending to cause the club any harm, the consequences were not activated. That's not all of it, but it does explain your ability to talk about it."

"That's a fairly complicated and advanced ward scheme," said Daphne. She appeared a little skeptical.

"That's our Hermione," Harry said with a look of pride at his closest friend. "She isn't just book learned, you know," he said in a teasing manner.

"Harry!" Hermione scolded, embarrassed.

Harry merely gazed back at her, projecting an air of amused impudence.

The Slytherins appeared to accept this without further comment, though Daphne continued to peer at Hermione with some skepticism evident on her features. If Harry were to be completely honest with himself, he felt a little affronted on behalf of his friend. It seemed a typical sort of Slytherin reaction to assume themselves superior to Muggleborns—and everyone else, for that matter. Hermione was an extremely knowledgeable and even gifted witch. It was time that others started recognizing that fact, rather than this stupid blood nonsense which was pushed—and even passively accepted—by so many.

"We will sign your register," Daphne stated after meeting the gaze of the rest of her housemates. "As I said, none of us are part of Malfoy's group, and we want to learn to defend ourselves."

"Will this not cause difficulties in your house?" Harry asked.

Daphne snorted and several of the others either rolled their eyes or appeared to brush the question off with little or no concern. However, once again Daphne acted as the spokesman for the group. "Malfoy—and perhaps certain others—will undoubtedly make a stink about it once it becomes known. We're not really concerned about that."

"Only certain others?" was Harry's skeptical response.

"You are thinking like a Gryffindor, Potter," Tracey stated bluntly. "No doubt the house of the lion enjoys a certain amount of house unity. Slytherin is the house of the cunning and, more importantly, the ambitious. Unity is all well and good, but ambition does not foster trust and unity very well. It is difficult enough to realize your

ambitions; trusting someone else can easily see you stabbed in the back."

"What Tracey is trying to say," interjected Daphne once again, "is that Slytherin, as a house, tends to be more everyone for themselves. About the only thing that unifies Slytherin at all is Quidditch and the house cup, and even then it's only superficial."

It was all very well and good for them to say that—they knew their house and their housemates better than Harry did, after all. But he could not help but think that they were downplaying the issue. Dumbledore's admonishments aside, Slytherin was a house essentially for the Purebloods and their very ideals fostered bigotry. Any fraternizing with the enemy—in this case Gryffindor and what Gryffindor house stood for—would surely bring the more conservative element of Slytherin out of the woodwork with a vengeance.

"Oh honestly, Potter," Daphne snapped in irritation, "why do you care about a bunch of Slytherins anyway? We told you it won't be a problem—shouldn't that be enough?"

"I care because I'm leading the club," Harry rejoined. "I don't teach anyone to become a target—I teach them so that hopefully they will be less of an enticing target, not to mention the effect I hope it will have on everyone's OWLs and NEWTs."

Daphne's face softened and she smiled ruefully. "I suppose I'm just not used to your... Gryffindor caring."

"Whatever," Tracey said with a grunt. "The fact of the matter is that any one of us here can take care of Malfoy right now without any further instruction, and the bunch of us together can hold off him and his cronies. Malfoy has a much higher opinion of his own capabilities than he truly possesses."

"As defense class today demonstrated," Daphne interjected with a grin at Hermione. "Nice work, by the way. It was good to see the 'Prince of Slytherin' taken down a notch and exposed for being the blowhard he is."

Harry grinned at his friend. "It's not the first time Hermione has taken him down, but it is probably the first time he's been shown up so thoroughly in front of the entire class."

"You'll have to tell us about it some time," Daphne said. "For now, all you have to be concerned with is the fact that we can defend ourselves when it comes to Malfoy and his gang. No one else in Slytherin will care enough to confront us over it."

"In fact," she continued with a smirk, "the more cunning amongst us will likely congratulate us for getting closer to you. They'll likely think we're using you and playing both sides."

"And are you?"

Daphne affected an innocent expression. "I can't tell you that now, can I? It would not be very cunning of me if I revealed my plans and motivations."

Harry decided right then and there that he liked Daphne. She was obviously intelligent, seemed sincere, and she had an understated sense of humor which he found infectious. He was almost persuaded; there was just one more thing which needed to be said.

"Very well then," he said, and when he continued, he tried to project a very serious and implacable air. "But one thing you must all understand. I don't know exactly what your feelings are or what your beliefs are regarding this blood purity nonsense, but there is no room for that in the Defense Club."

If he had expected any of the Slytherins to take offense—or even react at all—to his words he was disappointed. The six of them simply sat and watched him, expressionless, waiting for him to complete his instructions.

"Everyone in the club is equal," Harry continued, "and if you feel like you are better than Fleur or Hermione because of their ancestry, then I suggest you either bury those feelings deep or don't bother to join. As Hermione demonstrated in Defense class, she is the equal of anyone in any house, no matter what their blood status is."



Hermione appeared to be somewhat embarrassed at Harry's praise, but that did not stop him. He would not put up with anything which would cause either of his two companions any discomfort.

"Really, Potter," Daphne finally responded with a certain sense of exasperation, "do you think we would really be here if we bought into all that Pureblood stuff?"

"I don't know," Harry responded with a smirk. "You're Slytherins after all—you may simply be in this to get close to me."

Daphne and Tracey exchanged a glance and laughed. "Touché, Potter, touché," Tracey said. The Slytherins in general appeared to be somewhat amused at Harry's ability to throw the words of one of their own back at her. Perhaps he had gained a modicum of respect from these snakes.

"If it will help, none of us here put any stock in blood purity," Greta White spoke up for the first time. "Besides us swearing an oath, I'm not sure what else we can do to assure you of our sincerity."

Though his original opinion of her as a haughty girl was not appeased in the slightest as a result of her tone of voice, she at least appeared to be sincere. Harry could do nothing more than nod in response.

"Your word will do. I just wanted that fact understood before we go any further, and would prefer not to have to kick anyone out of the club if I can help it."

"Understandable," Daphne murmured.

Their impromptu meeting broke up soon after, with the Slytherins promising to arrive early to the club meeting on Wednesday in order to sign the register. Harry left the classroom pondering what had just occurred, not to mention the change in his attitude toward certain Slytherins. The next meeting would undoubtedly prove to be interesting; no doubt, displeasure at their presence would come from several quarters.

As requested, the six Slytherins arrived about a half hour before the Club meeting was scheduled to begin. The signing of the register was accomplished in a moment, and though Harry would perhaps

have expected members of the house of the ambitious to want a detailed explanation, or at least attempt through guile to discover some idea of what the consequences for betraying the club consisted, the Slytherins said nothing. They merely signed their names to the register and turned their attention to Harry, clearly expecting him to instruct them on what they could expect next.

Taking the lead, Harry used the time remaining before the meeting trying to determine exactly what level these new entrants were at, so the trio could properly determine where they fit in with the club. What he had expected from them as a group he certainly could not have said. The only Slytherins he had ever witnessed performing any actual magic were Malfoy and his group, as he had never made a habit of watching any Slytherins in any of his classes. Malfoy had been exposed as much more talk than competence, his book-end bodyguards were downright stupid, while Parkinson was certainly no threat herself. The only one who seemed to have any level of real skill to back up his threats was Nott, and Harry did not know enough about him to truly judge. Thus, his examples of Slytherin competence were not exactly sterling.

By contrast, these particular Slytherins appeared to be able to back whatever boasts they chose to make with their wands. Daphne and Tracey handled themselves with an understated confidence, and cast whatever spells Harry requested with no hesitation, and while finesse was perhaps not Blaise Zabini's strong point, he more than made up for that lack with brute strength. Nigel was quick and efficient with his casting, and while Greta and Astoria—the younger members—were perhaps not as polished or knowledgeable as their older companions, they appeared to understand the material at their level as well as could be expected.

It was obvious that in terms of sheer skill and competence, the Slytherins would fit into the club quite nicely. It would remain to be seen whether or not they would fit in socially.

When the clock was nearing seven, Harry asked the Slytherins to have a seat as they awaited the arrival of the rest of the club. They did what they were asked without protest, likely expecting that protests to their inclusion would come from certain quarters—Harry had told them he would handle any objections, and that they should keep their peace until they were asked to speak. He hoped he had imparted the need to adhere to his request with enough urgency—

nothing they said would gain them acceptance, he felt. He would have to vouch for them; after that it would be up to them to prove themselves to the other members.

As the club began to filter in, Harry and his companions searched for reactions to the newcomers. They found surprise aplenty, though most showed no more than that.

It was nearing seven when Professors Flitwick and Dumbledore entered the room.

"Did you know that the Headmaster would be here, Harry?" Fleur asked quietly.

Harry shook his head. "He didn't mention anything to me."

"He obviously wants to see what we're doing here," said Hermione.

By that time the two professors had made their way through the rows of chairs, and approached with smiles upon their faces. "Harry!" the Headmaster greeted jovially. "I hope you don't mind my attending. I thought I'd come and see how your club works."

"Of course, Headmaster," Harry responded, though in truth he was not at all enthusiastic about Dumbledore's presence. It was not every day that one had the school Headmaster—who also happened to be teaching Defense at present—sit in to see how well you were doing teaching others.

"I must admit to being curious myself," Flitwick chimed in. The excitable little Charms Professor had eagerly accepted Harry's request to become the staff sponsor for the club, and had even agreed to assist in the instruction of dueling practices.

"We hope we do not disappoint," said Hermione, though her easy smile belied any sense of nervousness her words may have engendered.

"Nonsense!" was Flitwick's jovial response. "I have every confidence in Mr. Potter's skill, and your ability to plan properly with the help of Miss Delacour here." This last he said with a smile toward Fleur, who returned in as easy a manner as Hermione had.

"Yes, well I think we should sit back and observe for the time being," Dumbledore interjected. He smiled and nodded at Harry and his friends before he and Flitwick chose a pair of chairs off to the side of where the club members were sitting.

During the brief conversation with the two professors, the final stragglers had arrived. The expressions on the faces of the students were a mixture of surprise that the Headmaster had joined them, and suspicion at the presence of the Slytherins.

Unsurprisingly—and perhaps surprisingly—the most marked disapproving reactions were from Ron—whose disdain for all things Slytherin was almost legendary—and Roger Davies, though both of them immediately noted the presence of two members of the staff and wisely kept their own counsel. Harry had expected Ron to object to the presence of the members of the house of the snake, though he thought that Ron was open-minded enough to grudgingly accept it, once their reasons had been made known.

Roger, though, was an enigma. His first reaction to seeing the Slytherins was surprise, which had soon turned to suspicion and, unless Harry misread him entirely, fury at their presence. Even after he sat down, he engaged in directing surreptitious glares, though he was discreet enough about it that Harry suspected no one else in the room noticed.

What concerned Harry even more were the looks of equal disgust Roger directed at him when he thought Harry was not looking. The Ravenclaw had been doing the same thing for the past several days, though Harry could not think of anything he had done recently which would account for Roger's behavior. Roger had never precisely been friendly in the past, but he had certainly never been this antagonistic. Perhaps the matter had something to do with Fleur, though if that was the case, Harry would have thought Roger's behavior would have begun back in September when he had arrived at the school already betrothed to Fleur, and not more than two months later. The fact that Fleur had confirmed that there had been absolutely nothing between them the previous year seemed to disprove that theory. Whatever the cause, apparently the Boy-Who-Lived had somehow managed to offend the Ravenclaw Head Boy. Whatever it was, Harry decided he would not worry about it. If Roger decided to make something of it, Harry would deal with it at that time.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, Harry noted that the entire club had arrived, and after sharing a glance with his two companions, stood to begin the meeting.

"Let's get started, everyone," Harry said, as the room quieted. "Today we'll be practicing some more dueling techniques, as well as the defensive spell for this week. But before we begin, I'm sure that all of you have noticed the additions of several new faces to our group."

Motioning to the two professors, he continued, "First, I'd like to welcome Headmaster Dumbledore, who will be observing tonight, as well as our staff sponsor, Professor Flitwick."

The two faculty members nodded to the polite applause which erupted in response to the introduction, while Harry grinned at them. "Given the pleasure that Defense class was this week, I'm looking forward to the Headmaster lending his expertise. And though some of you may not know it, Professor Flitwick was a professional dueling champion. I'm sure we will all benefit from their assistance.

"In addition," Harry continued, as the club members took in this intelligence, "we also have some new members. Please join us all in welcoming Daphne Greengrass, Astoria Greengrass, Tracey Davis, Blaise Zabini, Greta White, and Nigel Johnson to our ranks."

A halfhearted round of applause met Harry's statement, prompting a sardonic smirk to appear on Daphne's face. It was an expression which was mirrored on most of the Slytherin party's faces, though Harry could not help but feel that such an obvious level of sarcasm would do nothing to help ensure their acceptance into the club.

"I thought this club was to be kept a secret, Potter," said Roger with a disdainful sniff. "It seems that little restriction has gone by the wayside rather quickly."

"If you want to blame anyone, blame me," Susan spoke up with a glare for the Head Boy. "I was the one who spoke to Daphne and invited her—our family has been friends for years."

Roger snorted. "Family friends or not, I was under the assumption that we were not to speak with anyone regarding the club, or there would be consequences. Did your precautions not work?"

"The protections on the parchment work fine," said Hermione. "We had always intended for the members to be able to speak to others of the club who they trusted."

"Well, Slytherins don't exactly have a sterling reputation for trustworthiness," said Justin Finch-Fletchley.

It was unsurprising that a Hufflepuff would be the one to bring up the issues of trust and loyalty. They were, however, all good questions, though perhaps not the most tactfully stated—a few days prior Harry would have had exactly the same things to say in response to the presence of any member of the house of the snake. Though perhaps the objections of the club could be overcome, their new members would have to prove themselves by their actions and words over a longer period of time.

"That really doesn't matter," Hermione was saying in response to Justin's charge. "Susan considered Daphne to be trustworthy, and thus the protections were not brought into play."

"Seems to be a pretty poor way of setting up your security," Roger said with a slight sneer.

Harry gazed at the Head Boy, wondering what he was about. His disapproval and deep scowl were such that Harry thought he may have been more vocal in his disapproval. It was possible he was moderating his statements in view of the fact that the Headmaster was in the room, but Harry could not be certain.

"Regardless of what some members believe," Harry instructed with a pointed glance at Roger, "it has always been our intention to allow the club to spread to a certain extent by word of mouth. The only thing we asked was for the members to be careful in whom they were placing their trust."

"And I would not have said a thing if Umbridge had still been in the school," Susan broke in. "I still trust Daphne, but with the way Umbridge was courting Malfoy and his group, I wouldn't have taken the chance that they might have found out something."

"Shouldn't we allow the Slytherins to have their say?" asked Fleur.

All eyes turned to the group in silver and green sitting to the side of the room, but to their credit, none of them even batted an eyelash.

"I can only tell everyone what we told Potter when we met with him," was Daphne's simple reply. "That Slytherins by nature are ambitious and cunning is undeniable. But not all of us are part of Malfoy's little club. We are here to learn more about how to defend ourselves and our families. None of us have any ties to Death Eaters, Pureblood supremacists, or any other unsavory group."

"You met with them and interviewed them, Harry?" asked Ron.

Though Harry would have liked to know where his best friend was going with this question, Ron's face was schooled into a credible poker face. "We did, just a couple of nights ago."

"And you were satisfied with their reasons and their sincerity?"

"We were," Harry confirmed. "They also signed the register, which is no small gesture of trust and responsibility on their part."

Ron's gaze turned to the Slytherins and after a moment he seemed to come to a decision. He turned back to Harry and said, "If you think they're trustworthy, then that's good enough for me."

More than one jaw dropped in response to Ron's surprising statement, to which Ron merely arched an eyebrow at the company. "What?" he demanded with a sardonic smirk. "Yeah, I know you all expected me to fly off the handle here, but I trust Harry. If he says the Slytherins are trustworthy, I'll accept them until they prove otherwise. The rest of this talk is pointless—let's get down to business here."

"Very good, Mr. Weasley," the Headmaster, apparently forgotten by most of the room, said in response to Ron's statement. "Let this be a lesson to you all—never judge someone on so little information as what house they belong to. Always reserve your judgment and use your own observation to determine whether you can trust someone. You may get a nasty shock if you do otherwise."

With that, all opposition appeared to melt away; no one—not even the head boy, who still appeared to be unhappy at the Slytherins'

presence—was about to argue with the most famous wizard of his day.

The club did get down to business shortly after, though this time, with Dumbledore and Flitwick assisting, the instruction was often passed from Harry and his friends to the older and more experienced teachers. Flitwick was a master of using one's strengths and limiting one's weaknesses, while Dumbledore was such an amazing fount of knowledge and experience, that the time passed by swiftly, and Harry felt like the evening had truly been a success.

A/N:

1. Sorry this took a while, but the break was definitely needed. For those who have been following the largely forgotten Redemption, I have been working on it and have posted a new chapter tonight as well. For one night, it's a double post!

2. I don't have a cushion any longer, thanks to work and other things going on in my life, but I will try to meet the biweekly schedule I had going before, and will try to get ahead a little again. Things have eased off, so it should be okay.

3. I tried to stay away from the stereotypical Fanon descriptions of some of the characters I introduced in this chapter. Therefore, Susan is not curvy and possessed of huge... tracts of land (though I've always seen her as a little chubby in my own mind), Daphne is not an ice queen, and I've changed up Blaise and Tracey a little too. Hopefully they make for more interesting characters rather than just the same old thing again.

4. For those who still harbor fears that I'm going to turn to Ron bashing, I hope the end alleviates those concerns. He's changing and getting there - he's not all the way yet, but he is making progress.

5. Once again I find myself annoyed by a negative review by someone hiding behind the anonymous function, and this only a few minutes before posting! Since I cannot respond directly, I will do so here. I do not - nor have I ever - "padded my word count" artificially. I always say what I think needs to be said - no more, no less. I also go over every chapter very carefully and do a lot of editing. As I do



not use a beta at this time, I admit that I may miss things. Feel free to point out anything you think is incorrect or awkward; if I agree with you, I have no problem changing it. It appears that the reviewer simply doesn't like my writing style. If that is the case, please find something else to read.

## Chapter 23 – Developments

"It is about time you arrived."

Peevish. Impatient. Demanding. It was unlike Harry to be so... petulant, so arrogant and imperious in his demands.

Harry? Was it truly Harry? The question had no meaning. He was.

Location likewise had no meaning. The room was large, but poorly lit, with flaming lamps at intervals along the wall sputtered and smoked, filling the air with a miasma and adding to the feeling of the abyss—a hell on earth. The chair was high backed, situated in such a way as to give the appearance of a throne.

But such details were extraneous. More impression than reality.

A murmur or two of conversation undulated in the distance, though indistinct—nothing more than the distance crash of waves upon a shore. The denizens of this place knew the consequences of interrupting their lord and master.

Lord? Master?

The thought was shaken off almost as soon as it appeared. It too was unimportant. Irrelevant. The blond figure of a Death Eater quickly approached from the entrance to the room. His face was craggy and worn, and his hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Again, his appearance was fuzzy and almost indistinct. Unimportant.

The answers he hopefully possessed were not inconsequential.

"I apologize, My Lord," the figure said, making his obeisance. "I was detained by Amelia Bones on a matter of DMLE business."

He speared the man with a sharp gaze. "Anything about which I should be concerned?"

"Auror budgets, My Lord," the other said with a snort. "With Fudge in control, the flailing in the Auror department has not let up. Madam Bones is trying to make the most of her limited means, but her success is middling at best."

Satisfaction. Contentment. All was as it should be.

"Very well, then," he said with a negligent wave of his hand. "I sincerely hope you have some news for me."

The blond man shook his head with some regret. "Unfortunately, My Lord, the news I bring is not good."

Settling back in his chair, he eyed his underling with some exasperation. The temptation was there—it was always there—to give the man a taste of the fate of all those who failed. Pain. Suffering. Humiliation.

Still, it was likely not his fault, after all. He had been sent to procure a specific piece of information, and if the information was not to his benefit, it was hardly the man's fault. Object lessons were all well and good, but it was also necessary that there be some reason for dispensing them. For now it was better to listen and wait—punishment could be administered later, should it be warranted.

"What have you discovered?"

"The Hall of Prophecy is virtually undefended, My Lord. Unfortunately it does not need to be, as the prophecy globes are all protected by a series of protections which render them untouchable by any but the subject of the prophecy contained therein."

"And what is the nature of these protections?"

The Death Eater spread his arms open in supplication. "I am sorry, My Lord, but I am unsure. The unspeakable with whom I was speaking would not elaborate, and I felt it wise not to press."

"Undoubtedly," he murmured, knowing it was only the truth. The importance of his spies in the Ministry was not to be underestimated, regardless of how critical he now felt obtaining the entire prophecy was. It would not do to have his servant discovered amongst them. "What can you tell me?"

"Only what I have said before—the subject of the prophecy is the only one who may safely remove the orb. Anyone else who attempts to do so will be driven insane by the enchantments."

"The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord..." Technically, the Dark Lord had been mentioned in the fragment of which he was aware. Did that then mean that he was able to remove the orb himself, or was the subject the only one with the right to do so?

Calm. Patience. Prudence. This matter would take more study. More planning. It would not do to rush in without due consideration and activate the magic protecting the orbs. Careful deliberation would be required.

"If I may, My Lord," the Death Eater continued, breaking his thoughts, "you have a servant in Azkaban who would likely be able to tell you more of what you seek."

"That matter does not concern you," he said. "You had best focus on the tasks I have entrusted to you—I do not wish for your cover at the Ministry to be compromised."

"Of course, My Lord," responded the Death Eater.

"I think we must proceed under the assumption that I cannot touch the orb," he mused, half to himself. "And if I cannot, then the only one who can is..."

Harry jolted awake.

Confused, he peered around, seeing the still-sleeping forms of his dorm mates huddled under their blankets. A glance toward the window revealed blackness of the Scotland night. It could not be later than perhaps two in the morning.

Groaning, Harry pulled himself upright, and slumped on the bed with his face buried in his hands. What a perfectly dreadful night! Sleep had been a long time coming, his rest had been fitful, and the appearance of the Dark Lord in his dreams had been the final indignity.

What was Tom Riddle up to now? This word of a prophecy, protections which would drive a man insane, and a clearly plotting Dark Lord was discomfiting. If only Harry could have stayed asleep a little longer—perhaps he would have been able to hear what Voldemort was planning. It was frustrating.

Sighing, Harry looked around at the others before he once again hunkered down into his bed. The Headmaster would need to know about this new development, obviously, but given the time, Harry would attempt to sleep again. Surely it was not critical enough to wake Dumbledore in the middle of the night.

Though his mind would have worked over the problem for some time to come, Harry's fatigue was enough that he soon slipped into the blissful embrace of sleep. And if his sleep was still somewhat fitful and restless, at least it was not invaded by Dark Lords and their minions.

The next morning, Harry left Gryffindor tower before any of his friends had awakened; the fact that it was a Saturday meant that most students would be sleeping in that day, though likely not too late. It was a Hogsmeade day, after all. And though Harry was not precisely avoiding everyone else, he knew that his generally tired demeanor would raise questions and he wanted to discuss the dream with Dumbledore before deciding whether it should be shared with his friends. Besides, some time with the headmaster would help him wake up and appear more like his normal self.

Knowing the man's habits to a certain extent, Harry found him in the Great Hall at breakfast and, after grabbing a few bites to eat, Harry approached him and requested a few moments of his time. It was not long after before Harry was seated in the head's office across the desk from his mentor, explaining what had happened the night before.

As the explanation wound down, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers together, deep in thought. Harry thought he detected a glimmer of understanding Dumbledore's face as he was explaining his experience, but whatever it had been was gone in an instant, replaced by the expression of contemplation.

"What does it mean, sir?" Harry asked after enduring a few moments of silence.

Dumbledore started and peered at him—Harry had the distinct impression that the man had forgotten all about his presence. He smiled in his congenial manner, obviously trying to help Harry feel at ease. "The Hall of Prophecy, you say. And Voldemort was asking for information about one of the prophecies."

"Yes, but he seemed to think that one of the prophecies was about him too," Harry responded. "If it was about him, wouldn't he be able to remove it?"

"No Harry," replied the headmaster, "though that is a very good question. Just because one is mentioned in a prophecy does not make the prophecy about them. If the prophecy the Dark Lord is interested in is specifically about someone else, and only mentions Voldemort, then he will not be able to remove it."

"He did think that he had to be cautious about it. He thought he would have to study it more before taking any action. He seemed to think that there was someone else who could remove it, but I woke up before I could find out who it was."

Leaning forward, Dumbledore rested his elbows on his desk and he gazed at Harry, who felt more than a little uncomfortable at having the professor's attention on him with such intensity. "Harry, the Dark Lord may have information about a specific prophecy, but you must not think about it. It is good that you brought this information to me as I may make some attempt to find out what he is searching for, and if necessary, prevent him from doing so.

"I must warn you," Dumbledore continued sternly, "not to take anything you hear through your connection to the Dark Lord at face value. If he is aware of the fact that you visited him in your dreams, he may try to trick you, hoping that you would act rashly. He can use this to hurt you, Harry, and it is not something you can take lightly. You must not respond to him in any way, or give him any reason to suspect that you are hearing his thoughts. And above all you must not be goaded into falling into a trap. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir," Harry responded automatically.

"Good." Dumbledore once again leaned back and his eyes lost their focus in his concentration. "Remember that you are still young and though you are very mature, that there are things about the world which you still do not know. Please approach me with any questions you may have, and I will do my best to answer them"

Once again Dumbledore's eyes focused on Harry, causing him to feel a little uncomfortable. "For now, I believe this is something about which you do not need to concern yourself. Let me handle it."

"I understand," was Harry's reply. There was nothing he could do about it, after all, and he trusted the headmaster—Dumbledore would not lead him astray.

"I do have one more question for you. Is this the first such occurrence you have ever seen Voldemort in your dreams?"

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. "No Sir."

But Dumbledore's countenance was not so stern as Harry would have thought. "I understand it can be difficult, Harry. You want to be responsible for your own life and feel like you have some control. I was not unlike you as a young man.

"However, as we are dealing with the Dark Lord and his minions, I would ask you to trust me and tell me of any other instances where you overhear what he is thinking. Not only can this help us gain critical information, but as I stated, I am concerned that Voldemort may try to use this seeming... connection for his own purposes."

"It doesn't happen very often," Harry was quick to say. "Only on occasion, and often when he is angry or ecstatic."

"That may very well be," replied Dumbledore. "But he may become aware of you and seek to use it for his own gain.

"Now," Dumbledore continued in a kindly voice, "why don't you tell me about these other experiences?"

The next hour was spent in earnest conversation with Harry speaking of the times he had seen Voldemort in his dreams, and Dumbledore offering advice and guidance to the young man. He particularly focused on the dream Harry had had the previous year, and the figures who had appeared in that dream, though he made no comments about what any of it meant. The experience was somewhat draining for Harry and by the time he was finished he felt even more tired, though somewhat relieved at having unburdened himself to a sympathetic ear.

At the end of it, Dumbledore dismissed him, admonishing him to enjoy his day in Hogsmeade with his friends. But he once again encouraged Harry to come to him whenever he had any similar experiences in the future. "Remember, Harry, to always come to see me if you find Voldemort in your dreams. It may be that at some point we will be required to act in order to close this link between you and Voldemort. Let me think about it for a time."

"I understand, Sir," Harry dutifully replied before he stood and exited the office.

The frustrating thing about Dumbledore was that he played his cards very close to the vest, Harry mused. It was not that he was second guessing the Headmaster—Dumbledore had fought the good fight for longer than Harry had been alive, and Harry knew the man deserved his respect. It was more that he wished that he would be considered more of an adult, and worthy to be trusted as such.

Sighing, Harry wandered through the hallways of the school for some time, thinking on his dream and the discussion with the Headmaster. He did not return to the common room for some time, and when he did, he brushed off all questions about where he had been or what he had been doing. He needed to sort things out in his own mind before he was ready to talk about anything which had occurred. Instead, he insisted that the friends leave for Hogsmeade immediately—all the easier to avoid questions he did not want to answer.

In another part of the country, Jean-Sebastian Delacour sat in the study of the Ambassador's Mansion, scowling at everything and nothing all at once. The previous week had not been a good one, regardless of the fact that that blasted woman was now gone from Hogwarts, never to return. The situation in England, though Voldemort had as yet made no overt moves against the government, continued to deteriorate, completely due to the fact that the Death Eaters, he was certain, were preparing for an all out conflict, while the Minister continued to do nothing.

The thought of Fudge in particular caused the ambassador to clench his hands into fists of rage. To Fudge, Voldemort was dead and gone, never to return. The Dark Lord had been proven to be dead most conclusively, the man averred. He would not return and the stories told by Dumbledore and Potter were nothing more than scare



tactics designed to destabilize the government and consolidate more power into their own hands. The fact that one of the two wizards he accused of making a play for power was only fifteen years of age did not faze the man in the slightest. His paranoia was beyond belief.

The worst part of it was that he would not even do anything based on the possibility that Harry was telling the truth. No investigations were being conducted—though in truth Jean-Sebastian suspected that Madam Bones was keeping her eyes open, given what he knew of her—the Auror budget had not been increased, and there was a sense of complacency about the man which Jean-Sebastian found infuriating. With this much of a head start, it would be very difficult to defeat Voldemort and his forces without much hardship, pain and death.

And it was this environment that particularly worried him, especially when it came to the safety of his family. He would much prefer that Appoline and Gabrielle had stayed in France at the castle where it was safer, but though he had raised the possibility of their return with Appoline a number of times since their arrival, she stubbornly refused to see reason and insisted that she would not run from the danger to which her husband and eldest daughter would continue to be exposed. She even offered to send Gabrielle back, but refused to leave herself.

Of Fleur, Jean-Sebastian was only mildly concerned. Fleur was an adult, and a very competent witch in her own right, and she had Harry and rest of his friends to back her up, not to mention being behind the most impressive set of wards in the country at Hogwarts. And though the mansion appeared to be secure, and well protected with a number of highly trained Aurors assigned to their protection detail, Jean-Sebastian worried that it would not be enough should Voldemort decide that the Delacours had become a serious threat to his plans.

The fireplace in Jean-Sebastian's study flared, and Dumbledore's face appeared in the green flames. "Ah, Jean-Sebastian, may I step through?"

Thinking uncharitably that Dumbledore only wanted to speak when he had bad news, Jean-Sebastian gave his consent, and waited until the aged Headmaster stepped through.

"There has been a development," Dumbledore stated without preamble when he arrived in the study.

Jean-Sebastian wearily waved his guest to a chair, before sitting down himself and massaging his temples. "Can I assume that this news of yours is not something I would wish to hear?"

A chuckle met his cynical and somewhat petulant statement, prompting Jean-Sebastian to glare at the headmaster. "This negativity is most unbecoming, Jean-Sebastian," Dumbledore admonished. "Surely the situation is not that dire yet."

"You try talking some sense into Fudge," Jean-Sebastian growled in response. "His willful obtuseness and his inability to see reason is amazing and infuriating all at once."

"But you forget, Jean-Sebastian," said an amused Dumbledore, "I have been dealing with the man virtually the entire time I've been Chief Warlock. I assure you that I am very familiar with the Minister's quirks."

"However, that is not why I am here today," Dumbledore continued in a more solemn and serious tone. "Harry came to me this morning with a matter of some concern. I believe you should know of it."

Proceeding from there, Dumbledore laid out the entirety of his conversation with Harry, concisely and without embellishment. And though Jean-Sebastian felt a little sick at the thought of having such an insane despot roaming around in Harry's head, he concentrated on what Dumbledore had to say. Harry, no doubt, was very used to the Dark Lord's interference in his life, and though Harry was, by Dumbledore's account, worried about the insight he had gained this morning, he was likely much more accepting of the situation than Jean-Sebastian could be at the moment.

"So, he's after the prophecy."

"I believe he is," confirmed Dumbledore. "It was inevitable that he eventually would turn his attention to it. By now, he must have realized that he does not have the prophecy in its entirety, and I believe that we can attribute to that the fact that he has not been more aggressive since his return. His failure to kill Harry at the end of the third task must have made him more cautious."

Sitting back in his chair, Jean-Sebastian directed a long look at the Headmaster, wondering what the man knew but was not sharing at this time. Yes, the thought of the Dark Lord seeking the missing part of the prophecy was troubling, but at the moment, Jean-Sebastian was much more concerned about the fact that Harry had been able to witness him in his dreams at all. It was this aspect which he focused on.

"Why was Harry able to see Voldemort at all?" Jean-Sebastian asked. "That is the more troublesome development in my mind."

"I am uncertain," replied Dumbledore, frowning. "It appears as though Harry has some sort of... connection, for want of a better term, with the Dark Lord. He has always had strong reactions when in proximity with Voldemort, though until this morning I was unaware of the fact that he has seen Voldemort in his dreams. The silver lining in all of this is that Voldemort does not seem to suspect that this connection exists."

Jean-Sebastian scowled. "That's hardly a silver lining. He could become aware of it at any time."

"Perhaps. If Harry does nothing to betray himself and does not go trying to exploit the connection while he is awake, the Dark Lord should remain oblivious and the situation should remain as it is."

"Do you think he should be taught Occlumency to close the link?" asked Jean-Sebastian after a moment's thought.

Dumbledore pursed his lips and his eyes unfocused for a moment. "Not at this time," he answered at length. "For now Voldemort does not seem to be aware of it, and if Harry were to learn Occlumency, he may sense a block he was not aware existed. Occlumency training may become necessary, but for now I suggest we leave it be."

"And what of the globe? Is it safe?"

"For the time being, the globes are protected. Voldemort's source was correct in that the globes are protected by extensive enchantments which will prevent him from simply removing them."

"So Voldemort cannot touch them?"

"In a word—no," said Dumbledore. "It is not enough for a person to simply be mentioned in the prophecy. The prophecy has to be about them, or they will not be able to remove it.

"In the future I cannot say. It is possible that Voldemort may find some way to circumvent the protections. However, I do not believe we need to concern ourselves with that eventuality for some months—it would take him a great deal of time to do so, and it's not as though he can move about freely in the Ministry."

Absorbing all that Dumbledore had said, Jean-Sebastian considered the situation and the fact that Harry was beginning to be pulled ever tighter into the Dark Lord's web. Events were building toward a confrontation, and knowing what he did about the prophecy and Harry's ultimate fate in the coming struggle, Jean-Sebastian was becoming convinced that they would need to prepare for that showdown.

Beyond that, Jean-Sebastian had begun to experience a steadily growing feeling that Harry should have been told exactly what was happening in his life. He deserved to know.

"Headmaster," Jean-Sebastian began slowly and deliberately, "I think that with this most recent development that Harry needs to be told of the prophecy."

Leaning back in his chair, Dumbledore scratched his beard in some thought. "I believe that it is still too early to worry Harry with this knowledge, Jean-Sebastian. Harry is still young—too young to carry the burden of the entire world upon his shoulders."

"I think you may be putting a little too much stock in this prophecy, Albus."

"While I would have, at one time, tended to agree with you, I firmly believe in the accuracy of true prophecy. I would like to give Harry a little more time to mature and grow before sharing this information with him."

Jean-Sebastian was silent for several moments, thinking of all that Dumbledore had said. It was a substantial burden for a young man,

but Jean-Sebastian also knew in his heart that to keep it from Harry was not only unfair, but perhaps even dangerous. He was uncertain from where this feeling originated, but he was certain it was the truth.

"Dumbledore, I understand you have Harry's best interests at heart," Jean-Sebastian spoke in a very soft tone of voice. "But I believe he needs to know. He is mature and competent, and he deserves to know the truth of why this insane wizard has fixated upon him.

"During the summer, I promised Harry and my daughter that I would not withhold any information from them, and immediately after I broke my word when you told me of the prophecy. I cannot in good conscience delay much longer."

"I suppose you cannot," Dumbledore responded with a sigh. "However, I would urge you to keep silent a little longer. We shall choose the best time to tell Harry everything—I don't want to burden him any more than is needed."

"Very well," said Jean-Sebastian. "But we cannot wait long. Very soon we will have to tell him, and if you do not, then I will."

With this statement, their conversation was over. Dumbledore bid Jean-Sebastian farewell and left to return to Hogwarts, leaving Jean-Sebastian alone with his thoughts. With this new knowledge, they could not be any lighter than they had been before Dumbledore's arrival.

For Harry, the next week could not pass swiftly enough. Though the dream of Voldemort and the information it imparted left him somewhat out of sorts for several days, a new and exciting diversion soon took over and all Harry's attention was focused toward this new goal. The next Saturday was to be Gryffidor's first Quidditch match of the year, and as it was to be against Slytherin, it heightened his sense of expectation and excitement. And this did not even touch on the fact that Fleur was a part of the team, though she would likely not play at all. Slytherin was their most difficult opponent, after all, and Angelina would wish to field their best team with the best chance of winning.

To be honest, Harry was nowhere near the Quidditch freak that many assumed him to be—certainly nothing next to Ron who often could not be turned from the subject. It was more the excitement,

the roar of the crowd, and above all, the ability to fly, which Harry loved more than anything else. Still, the competition was welcome, and the ability to rub the little Pureblood's face in the fact that he had never managed to catch the snitch against Harry was not unwelcome either. Win or lose, Malfoy did not have the talent to beat him to the snitch, unless the golden ball appeared right under his nose. And even then it might be a close thing.

Harry chuckled a little under his breath at his own hubris and confidence, knowing that it was not exactly an attractive character trait, while also understanding that in this case, it was entirely the truth. As with many other things, Malfoy's talents as a seeker were grossly exaggerated in his own mind. Harry had the superior broom and the superior skills—he was supremely confident in his ability to beat the blond ponce.

Glancing around the table, Harry gauged that no one had been paying attention to his introspection, nor his sudden quiet laughter. The library was quiet on a Friday night, with only a few tables occupied, mostly by seventh years, focused as they were on their NEWTs at the end of the year. Hermione's table was crowded as all the friends had settled in for a bit of late evening study, and though their ages and personalities were disparate, Harry felt the heady feeling of camaraderie which had not always been present in his life, even since he had come to Hogwarts.

Ron and Hermione were, of course, mainstays; their friendship had endured through all of their adventures, not to mention the discord sown by Harry's inclusion in the tournament the previous year. And Fleur, though new to Harry's circle, and admittedly only present because of the enactment of the betrothal, had quickly become an integral part of Harry's life and wellbeing. Neville had always been there, though somewhat separate. Now he was an insider to their group, and a welcome one at that. Still shy and somewhat awkward at times, Neville had nonetheless grown in many ways, and Harry valued his calm and rational demeanor. And though both Luna and Ginny were a year younger than everyone else at the table, they were no less valued as friends. Luna's spacey personality and tendency to talk about fantastical creatures was now looked on as a person quirk, rather than an overt oddity, and Ginny, while Harry did still catch her peering at him longingly at times, was now comfortable in his company, and her sense of fun and sunny personality were appreciated.

The final three at the table, Harry reflected, were a very new addition, though quickly becoming an integral part of the group. Susan Bones, though not intimate with the rest of the circle, had always been known to be friendly and open, and her abilities and knowledge, not to mention her Hufflepuff loyalty, were now accepted by all of Harry's friends. The other two, though, were so unlikely, that a few weeks ago, Harry would have laughed if told they would even be sitting at the same table without a frigid drop in temperature as a result.

The six Slytherin entries into the club had fit in from an ability standpoint, but had, for the most part, continued to be aloof from the rest of the club. The exception, however, was the two fifth year girls, who had gravitated towards Harry's circle in defiance of any expectation, or any protestations by the rest of their house, if any such existed. Harry's original impression of the two girls appeared to have been spot on—Tracey Davis was rather chatty once she felt at ease with the company and Daphne, though certainly much more reserved, was friendly and outgoing. They were still very much in the formative stages of their inclusion in the group and their friendship with the group members—a few weeks, after all, did not a lifelong friend make. But they were certainly making progress, and their friendliness and their competence at once made them welcome members of their little clique.

The reaction of Harry's friends to their presence was varied. Fleur still held them at arm's length to a certain extent, likely in part because she did not know them, and in part because of her knowledge of many Purebloods' opinions of her. Neville seemed to take their presence in stride, and while Hermione was at times as cautious of them as Fleur was, she seemed to have found somewhat of a kindred spirit in Daphne. Daphne was in all the same elective courses as Hermione, and had even begun to take part in Harry's ongoing tutoring sessions in Ancient Runes, much to Harry's surprise.

But perhaps the most astonishing response of any of his friends was Ron. Ron had spent the first few study sessions with the Slytherins grumbling at their inclusion, though he had enough tact to try to hide it. Tracey responded in kind, distrusting him and his well-known abhorrence of Slytherins, and generally refusing to talk to him. Daphne simply ignored him.

Within a week, however, Harry was amused to find out that Ron's grumbling had largely stopped, and his attention toward the black-haired Slytherin had begun to become noticeable. Ron, never really subtle about much of anything, appeared to be captivated by the young woman—who was very attractive—and though Daphne had certainly noticed it herself, she had never called him on it, or given any reaction to his admiration whatsoever. She merely changed her treatment of him to mirror how she treated everyone else—that of an acquaintance becoming a closer friend—once the evidence of his obvious disdain had disappeared.

It was an unlikely circle of friends to be certain, but Harry was beginning to value each and every one of them. Not having had really any friends growing up, and having had only two companions since arriving at Hogwarts, having this many people on whom to rely was an alien concept to Harry. He found that he was truly enjoying the experience. And though some would say that Daphne and Tracey were still too new to truly trust, Harry felt that he could do so; his senses told him they were trustworthy, and he simply had a hunch that they were true friends. It was a heady feeling.

"Harry!"

The sound of an exasperated voice startled him out of his introspection and he turned his head, noticing Hermione's stern expression.

"What?"

A few muffled giggles sounded from around the table, and more than one set of eyes rolled in response to his obvious inattention.

"You'll never get his head out of the clouds," Neville said with a snigger. "At least not until after the Quidditch match tomorrow."

"That's the way it should be," said Ron with a grin. "We want our star seeker to concentrate on the match, you know. And come to think of it," he continued with a sly glance at the two Slytherins, "it will be much worse tomorrow after Gryffindor pastes Slytherin."

"Oy!"



"Hey!" the two Slytherins protested at almost exactly the same time.

"Come on," Ron scoffed. "You don't think Malfoy will actually catch the snitch tomorrow, do you?"

"I'll have you know that our chasers and beaters are well able to overcome such a... disappointment at seeker," was Daphne's prim response.

"And besides," Tracey continued with a smirk and a sly glance at Ron, "I've heard that Gryffindor's keeper makes Malfoy look positively competent."

"Oy!" It was Ron's turn to protest.

The two Slytherin girls just grinned at Ron, though to Harry it was not much of a laughing matter. Ron was capable as a keeper, but sometimes suffered from confidence issues—even though this discussion was not intended to be one of malice, he sensed, he was still worried that Ron would take it to heart and lose his confidence for the upcoming match.

"Nah," Neville came to the rescue. "Malfoy takes bragging without being able to back his words up to a new art level. We've got nothing to worry about."

Ron appeared to be taking it all in stride. With Neville's declaration, he leaned back in his chair and put his arms behind his head, smirking at the Slytherins all the while. "Too right, Mate. And besides, with the ponce at seeker, and because your house has a less than stellar shot at winning—and now that you have Gryffindor friends—maybe you should switch allegiance and cheer for Gryffindor."

"That will be the day," said Tracey with a snort. "Cheer for Gryffindor? I'm happy cheering for my own house team, regardless of blond and brainless, thank you."

"But you'd have so much better chance of being happy with the outcome," said Harry, getting in on the teasing.

"That's beside the point," said Daphne. "House unity may not go much further than Quidditch, but that, at least, is sacrosanct. Can you imagine the outcry in the Slytherin dungeons if we openly

cheered for Gryffindor? It would almost be as though the Holyhead Harpies entire fan base suddenly defected and start cheering for the Chudley Cannons!"

"Hey, what's wrong with the Cannons?" Ron protested.

"Other than the fact that they've never won anything?" Daphne retuned incredulously.

"Nothing is wrong with Chudley," said Tracey with a straight face, though the twitching at the sides of her mouth almost gave her away. "We're trying to illustrate a point here. The club is nothing. Even a hint of us cheering for Gryffindor would give Malfoy all he needed to go after us, and have the backing of the house."

"Suit yourself," said a mollified Ron with a shrug and an evil grin. "Don't say we didn't warn you."

The banter ratcheted up and the friends began discussing which house truly had the best team was this year. Hufflepuff, having lost Cedric Diggory the previous year, was not expected to do well at all this year, but that did not prevent Susan from getting into the discussion, while Luna, the only Ravenclaw, was not really interested in Quidditch. Given the rest of the table was comprised of Gryffindors, with Daphne and Tracey being the only Slytherins, the Gryffindors shamelessly used their numbers to claim that theirs was the best team.

Partaking in the conversation only peripherally, Harry sat back to watch his friends as they teased each other back and forth. This friendship and being part of a group definitely had its benefits, he decided. It was what he would have had, had he not grown up with the Dursleys. Hopefully, the friendships he had formed here, would last for a lifetime.

By the time the weekend rolled by, the Gryffindor team felt fully prepared and ready to take on their arch nemesis, confident in their ability to not only win the game, but that a win would almost certainly vault them onto the fast track to secure the house cup that year. Slytherin had always been the main competition—the two houses together had won more than three quarters of the Quidditch Cups since the inception of the Quidditch Cup more than five centuries earlier. This year would likely be no different, though Ravenclaw

would certainly be no pushover. Unfortunately, though, the assessment of the Hufflepuff team the previous evening was likely spot on—Cedric had given them a chance to win with his play at seeker, but without his steadying presence, Hufflepuff would likely find itself completely overmatched.

As Harry sat in the locker room before the match, he only half listened to Angelina's pre-game pep talk. The strategy was simple enough, and as his job was to catch the snitch, a lot of what was said really did not pertain to him. Normally, part of the strategy would be for the beaters to distract the opposing seeker in an attempt to ensure your own seeker was the first to spot the snitch. In this game the decision had been for the beaters to ignore Malfoy altogether, and concentrate instead on the opposing chasers, partially to help Ron as much as possible, and partially because they did not truly see Malfoy as a threat. It was not uncommon to utilize such a strategy when the opposing seeker was not particularly skilled, but Harry could only chuckle at the thought of how Malfoy would act if he knew of their game plan.

Instead of the game, Harry considered the Malfoy heir. Draco seemed to have been on a slow burn ever since the day of the Dumbledore's first defense class. Surprisingly he had said very little directly to Harry or any of his friends since then, but on his looks alone the boy could almost be charged with murder. He had gone from being an enemy and a nuisance to being a very dangerous enemy, regardless of what Harry thought of his capabilities. He would bear careful watching.

"Harry!" a voice from his side hissed. "Pay attention!"

Glancing at his betrothed, Harry winked at her. "Don't worry, Fleur. I know the game plan."

"Maybe so, but you really should pay attention to what the captain is saying."

Smiling, Harry shook his head slightly, and focused back on Angelina who was wrapping up her remarks. She had apparently noticed the quiet exchange between the two, but other than a frown, she said nothing to them directly.

Soon, the Gryffindor team filed from the room and, mounting their brooms, soared out into the stadium to the roar of three quarters of the crowd. Slytherin, with all their bully tactics and braggadocio was not well liked, even by Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Generally the three houses cheered for each other when playing Slytherin, leaving the snakes outnumbered, not that they particularly cared.

"And here comes the Gryffindor team," the voice of Lee Jordan rang out over the stadium. "Led by the lovely Angelina Johnson, Gryffindor has to be considered the favorite for the Quidditch Cup this year, the entire team—with the exception of Ron Weasley, the new keeper—having been together for four years. Or it would have been four years, had the faculty not broken our hearts and cancelled Quidditch last year."

"Jordan, if you don't mind," a muffled Professor McGonagall's voice broke in to the seventh year's comments.

"Of course, Professor."

Harry grinned—it was far from the most outrageous statement Lee had ever made during a Quidditch match.

It was a perfect day for Quidditch. The sun shone in the sky, illuminating the brightly colored stands and warming the air to the point where the Scotland afternoon was merely chilly, rather than the bone-chilling frigid temperatures in which Harry had played in the past. The warmth of the day also seemed to be an omen, though Harry almost laughed at his own fanciful turn of mind. Why the bright and sunny weather should favor Gryffindor any more than Slytherin was debatable.

Soaring to a point high above the pitch, Harry watched as the two teams took their positions on their own ends of the pitch. Across from Harry, Malfoy also took his position, his eyes drilling holes in Harry's armor, as usual. Harry merely smiled insolently at him, and peered about the stadium, plotting his strategy for finding the elusive golden ball.

A moment later, Madam Hooch began the match, and Harry watched as the Gryffindor chasers immediately gained control of the quaffle.

"And the game is under way! Johnson controls the quaffle, passes to Spinnet, back to Johnson, over to Bell who swoops in and scores!"

The roar of the crowd echoed out over the stadium and Harry, caught up in the emotion, pumped his fist in response to the quick Gryffindor tally.

A movement out of the corner of his eye prompted Harry to bank sharply to the right on instinct, as Malfoy swooped through the space Harry had just occupied. Harry was then forced to dodge in incoming bludger, hammered in his direction by one of Malfoy's beefy bodyguards. Though the Gryffindor beaters were going to ignore Malfoy, it obviously did not mean that Harry would receive the same treatment from the Slytherin beaters. Harry soared in a wide arc, and turned to face Malfoy, who once again charged him, an expression of grim determination mixed with loathing adorning his face. Harry directed an insolent grim smile at the Slytherin seeker—if that was the way Malfoy wanted to play it, Harry would certainly oblige him.

Thus began a game of cat and mouse between the two seekers. Malfoy appeared to put very little effort into finding the snitch, instead seeming intent upon knocking Harry from his broom. Between Malfoy and the beaters, Harry was kept very busy avoiding their attacks, though he devoted as much time as he could to find the snitch. In between his opponents' attacks, Harry also led Malfoy on a merry chase, feinting and diving, and taking a few runs at the Slytherin himself. Through all of this, Malfoy continued in his tactics, his determination never slipping.

While Malfoy and Harry, with the assistance of the Slytherin beaters, continued to play their game, the Gryffindor chasers continued to perform as a well-oiled machine, quickly racking the score up on their less experienced opponents. Harry was able to get a general sense of how the game was proceeding, though the specifics continued to elude him. Periodically, phrases would come to him as Lee continued to call the game.

"...Warrington is hit by a glancing blow! That will leave a mark..."

"...and Weasley let in another one, which perhaps he should have stopped..."

"...Johnson passes to Spinet...

"...Pucey passes to Warrington, who... oh that's got to smart! Weasley gets Warrington with a bludger again!

"...and Weasley makes a nice toe save. If only he'd make a few more...

"...perhaps the Gryffindors should sub, if only to get the lovely Miss Delacour into the game..."

"Jordan!"

An hour into the game, Harry had a brief respite, and took the opportunity to look at the scoreboard. Gryffindor was leading Slytherin 120 – 90, and Harry still had no glimpse whatsoever of the snitch.

"What, are you scared, Potter?" Malfoy yelled as he passed close by Harry in another attempt to knock him from his broom.

"In your dreams, Malfoy," Harry yelled back.

The two circled about one another warily for several moments before Harry, feigning excitement, suddenly dove toward the pitch with Malfoy following close behind. Pouring more speed into his Firebolt, Harry surged toward the ground, pulling up at the last moment, almost brushing the ground with his boots. Malfoy, unfortunately, was not quite so lucky, as his panicked attempts to stop resulted in his catching a boot on the turf, throwing his broom sideways. He managed to gain control again before crashing into the ground, and once he righted himself, he once again chased after Harry, a positively poisonous expression on his face.

Harry grinned in response to the cheer which erupted over the stands at the sight of the famous Wronski Feint, though Harry knew that Hermione was probably almost pulling her hair out over the sight. She had always been a little nervous when he pulled his aerial acrobatics and stunts.

Harry's personal game of avoidance with Malfoy continued, though the blond was obviously a little more careful in pursuing Harry—a

situation of which Harry wholeheartedly approved. In the meantime, the score continued to mount below until it was 260 – 190 with Gryffindor steadily pulling away.

"Hey Malfoy!" Harry jibed, swooping out of range of another of Malfoy's attacks. "You'd better hurry and catch the snitch! Your team will be too far behind if this keeps up!"

Merely snarling in response, Malfoy once again shot at Harry, which Harry avoided deftly, while charging away from the Slytherin and looking down on the pitch below.

"Fine!" he yelled at a pursuing Malfoy. "I thought I'd give you a chance, since you don't have one on your own. I guess I'll just have to catch it myself!"

The Malfoy scion, though, did not give any indication he had heard Harry's words, and Harry reflected that given the speed and the noise of the wind in his ears, that it was entirely possible that he had not.

Their confrontation continued for several more minutes, Harry continuing to dodge Malfoy's attacks and random bludgers, before Harry saw a hint of gold from below. He was careful not to react overtly, and instead dodged another pass by Malfoy and made for the area above the Slytherin keeper. There, hovering in behind the Bletchley, the Slytherin keeper, was the prized golden ball.

Harry immediately went into action. He turned abruptly and charged Malfoy, who dodged a little raggedly, and then Harry soared high into the air, prompting Malfoy to follow. When he had climbed high enough, he changed tack and sped into a dive toward the pitch. As he had intended, Malfoy, obviously remembering his near miss with the ground was much more cautious in following.

Dimly Harry heard the roar of the crowd as he approached the Slytherin posts, prompting a startled look from Bletchley. Harry ignored him; he roared by, missing the keeper by mere inches, as he reached out and snatched the snitch in his hand, raising it aloft in triumph.

The packed stands erupted into even greater cheers as the game ended, and Harry, smirking at a clearly enraged Malfoy, opened his mouth to taunt at the blond ponce—

WHAM!

Harry nearly pitched off of his broom, righting himself after a moment while keeping hold on the snitch.

"Harry!"

Angelina soared up to him, an expression of concern etched on her face. "Are you all right?"

Looking around, Harry spotted the bludger which had struck him in the back, and the dark of look of glee which adorned Goyle's face.

"It was Goyle," Angelina said unnecessarily. "He hit the bludger at you as soon as he saw you had the snitch."

Harry shrugged and tested his back—it appeared no damage had been done. "Don't worry about it. We won!"

The Gryffindor team took a victory lap around the stadium, before they landed in front of the Gryffindor stands where their housemates were waiting. Hugs and congratulations were freely flowing when trouble of a most familiar sort approached from behind.

"Hey scarhead, you got lucky again, didn't you!"

"I guess I must be really lucky, Bad Faith," Harry shot back. "I seem to have that luck every time I play you."

Malfoy's face turned almost red with rage. "You're a bit cocky for a jumped-up Halfblood."

"And you're cocky for someone who has never caught the snitch against me."

"Maybe we should just leave," said Fleur, nervously looking at the students who had drawn closer to the confrontation.



"In fact," Harry continued, grinning at Fleur, "I figure you must enjoy losing. What is this now? A four year losing streak to Gryffindor, and you've lost to me three times in a row. You would have lost four, if we had had Quidditch last year. Too bad—you could have had another loss to me on your resume!"

In a rage, Malfoy whipped out his wand. "Locomotor Mortis!" he screamed, following that up with a stinging hex aimed at Harry's face.

Harry dodged the incoming curses, and pulled his own wand, but was stopped by the arrival of the Headmaster, who had already disarmed Malfoy.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

In a moment the story of what had happened had come out, prompting Dumbledore to fix both antagonists with a stern glare. "I believe I have spoken to you both before about this rivalry of yours. It is getting out of control. If you cannot behave with decorum, I would ask you both to avoid the other from this time forward. If you cannot do that, then perhaps detention for you both would help you see the error of your ways."

Neither spoke—Harry tried to appear a little shameful, though he could not, in truth, say that he espoused any such feelings, while Malfoy had adopted that smug self-important smirk for which he was so famous.

"Now, I will deduct ten points from you each. In addition, Mr. Malfoy, you shall have two more nights detention due to your starting a fight and casting hexes at another student. If you do not wish to be suspended, I suggest you leave your wand in your pocket from this time forward."

Sneering, Malfoy turned and walked away without any further comment. Harry did not give the boy a second thought—they had won the match, setting themselves up for the rest of the year. Tonight, Gryffindor tower would no doubt be in a celebratory mood and Harry just wanted to savor the win.

"Let's get you cleaned up and head back to the tower," Fleur said, directing him toward the changing rooms.

"Are you offering to help?" was Harry's cheeky reply.

Fleur's smile turned sultry. "If you want."

The beet red color which bloomed on Harry's face prompted laughter from the assembled Gryffindors and Harry, now thoroughly embarrassed, made his way from the pitch, his image of the conquering hero completely destroyed by Fleur's comeback. He couldn't help but imagine, though, his mind turned completely from the completed Quidditch match, just what Fleur was offering, though not seriously, he sensed. She was a very beautiful woman after all.

Embarrassed all over again, Harry firmly pushed those thoughts away, though his mind did betray him a little as he watched his betrothed out of the corner of his eye. She was, he reflected, very pleasant to watch.

A/N:

1. It's finally finished. This one fought me to a certain extent and did not turn out anything like I had planned, but I think came out pretty well regardless.

2. I changed up the visions of Voldemort quite a bit. It makes sense to me that Voldemort would want some information about the globes, and since his only Unspeakable follower is in Azkaban at the moment, he resorts to one of his other followers doing a little information gathering. Since Sirius's situation is much different in this story, that whole plot line will develop quite differently.

3. And with that in mind, I've always thought that anything magically done can be undone if one knows how to do it. It will take some time for Voldemort to figure it out, of course...

4. Obviously, I changed up the Quidditch match quite a bit also, and the confrontation at the end was likewise changed because of Umbridge's absence. JKR's focus on Lee's commentary is somewhat amusing, but I wanted to focus a little more on Harry's perception of the game, what little he was able to see of it. I hope it worked the way I intended it to.

5. I hope those looking for a little more Harry/Fleur interaction are seeing some progression there. Though they did not interact very much in this chapter, they are starting to get a little closer, and their feelings are beginning to grow. No, Fleur has not spoken to Harry about Roger yet, but she will. And though I didn't really intend it, the bit at the end where Harry's fantasies started to get the better of him was fun to write, and shows that he's certainly not immune to her looks. He is only fifteen after all...

6. Finally, I just thought I'd illustrate a difference in fanfic genres. I started writing Star Wars, and though it's a very popular universe, Harry Potter simply dwarfs it, not only in number of readers, but number of stories, reviewers, etc. I posted a chapter to my ongoing Star Wars KotOR story, Redemption, at the same time I posted the previous chapter of this, and the differences are startling. Now, admittedly I had not posted to my SW story in some time, but over the past two weeks, it's gotten only two reviews, and it's gotten only 55 total reviews in 13 chapters. By contrast, HoS received 65 reviews for this chapter alone, and several more for earlier chapters by those who were catching up. In total, I estimate that since I last posted, HoS has received about 80 reviews, and will almost certainly pass 1500 total in this posting. even my alternate Return of the Jedi story, which can be expected to garner more reviews just because the characters are familiar to more people only averaged about 8 reviews per chapter. The contrast just boggles my mind, especially since in my own opinion, Redemption is a better written story in general than HoS. Not trying to plug my other story here; just pointing out that the differences still amaze me. I was used to getting 5 - 10 reviews per chapter when I was writing SW—for HP, I'm averaging over 60.

## Chapter 24 – Tournaments

The days after the Quidditch match were not good ones for the Slytherin Quidditch team, and more specifically for a certain blond ponce. Owning bragging rights for the annual Gryffindor/Slytherin Quidditch match was always welcome, and Harry made certain to let Malfoy know who won the match as often as possible. That he never said or insinuated anything overtly did nothing to assuage the blond's anger—the sly smirks and knowing glances alone ensured that he wore a permanent scowl on his face. In this, of course, Harry was joined by Ron, the Weasley twins, Lee Jordan, the three Gryffindor chasers, and just about every other male—or female!—in Gryffindor with any interest whatsoever in Quidditch.

Hermione and Fleur were not impressed as such with his theatrics, but Harry was undeterred and unconcerned. Yes, his behavior was smug and could not be deemed as sportsmanlike—nor was it a particularly likeable character trait—but Harry knew that Malfoy and the Slytherin team would have been so much worse if it had been they who had won the match. And Malfoy deserved it—oh did he deserve it!

The end of the Quidditch match refocused Harry attentions back to the leadership of the defense club, and more specifically, how to cater to the different competence levels in the club. One could not teach seventh years in the same manner in which fourth years and younger were taught, after all. Even more, it was often very difficult to determine exactly what level each of the club members was at, and he was wary of not insulting anyone by assuming they were less competent than they actually were.

He was grumbling about this fact the night after the Quidditch match when Fleur made a suggestion, more to stop his whining, he thought, than for any real concern over the problem. Hermione and Fleur had both told him repeatedly that he was over-thinking the issue and that things were progressing well.

"Why don't you have a tournament?"

Surprised, Harry gazed at Fleur, wondering to what, exactly, she was referring.

Fleur rolled her eyes and turned her full attention on her betrothed. "Harry, you keep complaining about the various levels of everyone in the club and how you don't really have a chance to observe everyone while they are all practicing at the same time. If you hold a tournament, not only will you be able to watch everyone in action—and in a simulated combat situation—but the results should tell you something about how everyone is doing."

"That's a good idea!" Hermione enthused. "There are some drawbacks, but it would certainly help."

"It might," Harry conceded. "But how would we handle it? The logistics are a little difficult to pull off."

"It's not like it's a professional tournament," Ron chimed in.

"Ron's right, Harry," said Hermione. "You could do a rough ranking based on what we've seen in the club meetings so far, and then create a tournament tree, and go from there. I think everyone would be excited about it too!"

"We'd have to separate out the younger years," Harry mused. "It wouldn't be fair for... Astoria Greengrass, for example, to have to duel Lee Jordan."

"I'll ask you to leave my sister out of this, Potter," Daphne chimed in with a severe glare, which was compromised immediately by the wink she directed at him.

Harry just waved her off.

"Then hold two separate tournaments, one for the younger years, and one for the older," said Fleur. "You could separate them at fourth year—first through fourth and fifth through seventh."

It did seem like a good idea, and to the amusement of everyone at the table, Harry dove right into it. With the assistance of Hermione's ever-present store of parchment and quills, he immediately set to work drawing up a list of rough rankings of everyone in the club, followed by a rough tournament tree. The difficulty, of course, was coming up with a fair and equitable method of scheduling the matches.

Fortunately, however, and through a strange quirk of fate, they ended up with almost exactly the right number of participants to run a tournament. There were eight fourth years and under, which made for a perfectly proportional tree, and 34 fifth years and up, which gave them two extra. Of course, as Harry was planning on refereeing and not participating, he did not count himself, and Fleur also offered to remove herself so she could assist him in judging the skill levels of the participants. This left them with the perfect number.

The rankings were, unsurprisingly, dominated to a large extent, with the seventh years, who were all ranked in the top ten, while the fifth years largely rounded out the lower tiers. Of course there was some variance, and in certain instances lower years ranked above their higher year classmates, but that was the general trend. Of course his friends pitched in to assist, though Harry had the final word in the rankings, which generated no little amount of comment from the group of friends.

"Harry, why did you rank me lower than Fred?" George, Harry assumed, protested at one point.

"He's got it right, Gred," Fred responded. "Everyone knows I'm the talented one. You're the inventive one." Fred tapped his finger against his lips for a moment in thought, before saying, "Of course, I'm pretty inventive too, so I guess that makes me the dominant twin."

"So says you," said George with a roll of his eyes. "I'm well-known as being gifted, incredibly handsome, not to mention devastatingly dapper."

"I think someone's got a bit of a swelled head," Hermione said in a stage whisper,

Fleur giggled by her side, while George grumped at having his heroic image ruined. The rest of the group laughed at the interplay.

"What I don't understand, Harry," Hermione spoke up, "is why you've got Cormac and Alice Tolipan ranked so low." Alice was a sixth year from Ravenclaw house, and a friend to Cho and Marietta.

Harry snorted with some scorn. "Cormac is a braggart who has a higher opinion of himself than anyone has a right to. As for Alice,

sometimes I wonder if she even knows which end of her wand is which."

This, of course, earned him a smack from Hermione. "That's not very nice!"

"But he does have a point," said Fleur. "Cormac is all words and no action and while Alice is very nice girl, she seems to have a little difficulty picking up the spells at times."

"What I'm not sure about is why you ranked me lower than Hermione," Ron said.

Harry turned and regarded his friend. Ron was to a certain extent joking, he thought. But at some level, he was also still somewhat insecure.

"These are just rough rankings, Ron," Harry replied. "I think you and Hermione are actually very close, but I ranked her higher because she knows lots of hexes."

"But what about my skill at strategy?" Ron said, his voice almost approaching a whine.

"Ron, an ability to play chess doesn't really have a lot to do with real world strategy," said Fred.

Ron appeared perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"Honestly, Ron," his brother replied again, "each of the pieces in chess has rigidly defined moves, and you can't make it do anything else. Real people and real battle situations are not like that."

"Your skill in chess will not be all that useful in a duel," added George. "You have to rely on your instincts, spell knowledge, ability to cast, among other things, not on knowing which way a piece might move on a chessboard."

Looking thoughtful, Ron nodded. Harry knew that Ron was aware of this, he was also sometimes a little too impressed with his prowess at the board game. A little humility for anyone was a good thing, he decided.

That Wednesday, the club gathered together in the Room of Requirement as usual, but more than a few looks were directed at the large dueling platform which Harry had placed in the center of the room. There were no comments, however—the participants merely sat in their chairs as usual, and waited for the club to start.

It was a quirk of the room, perhaps—or maybe just how it had been designed—but the room was a little... overeager to give its occupants what they wanted. As a result, Harry had to specifically narrow the request to include only himself, and to further limit the room's changes to oral requests for the course of the evening. Otherwise, the platform might disappear, to be replaced with who knew what, and likely at a most inopportune time.

When Professor Flitwick arrived, Harry was reminded exactly how excitable the little professor truly was. Upon hearing of their plan to have a tournament that week, he immediately launched into some stories about his time as a professional dueler, and began dispensing advice, not only with respect to how to gain the upper hand on an opponent, but also how to referee a match properly.

"You must give clear instructions from the beginning, Mr. Potter," he had enthusiastically advised. "The rules must be clearly understood if you want to stay in control of the combatants. And be decisive in your decisions as a judge of the match—it is the only way the duelers will respect you. Otherwise, they will argue your decisions until you are ready to hex them to get them to stop."

Now, as the half-goblin professor stepped into the room and smiled at them, Harry could only be amused. His respect for the professor's knowledge and skill, however, was unquestioned. Professor Flitwick was a font of information, and very passionate about his instruction, in more ways than one.

At the appointed time, Harry stood and surveyed the group, noting the looks of curiosity etched on the faces of the assembled—minus those of his immediately group, of course, who knew what was happening tonight—not to mention the slight sneer and unfriendly frown which Roger Davies customarily sent in his direction the past few weeks. Ignoring the suddenly cold Ravenclaw, Harry addressed the club.



"Welcome to everyone. Tonight we have a special activity planned." Harry turned and pointed at the platform. "Tonight, we will have a dueling tournament."

"Trying to remind everyone of your 'prowess' in the Tri-Wizard last year, are you?" Roger spoke disdainfully.

Harry ignored him. "This will give us a chance to see everyone in action and tailor our future meetings for everyone's benefit. Hermione?"

At Harry's gesture, Hermione stood and waved her wand. On the far wall a large poster board appeared with a pair of tournament trees marked on its surface.

"We've divided the group into two different tournaments," she explained, using her best lecturing voice, "one for the fourth years and under, and one with fifth through seventh years. We've roughly estimated everyone's ranking and created the tree accordingly."

Harry once again took over the explanation. "As for tournament rules, we will continue on with the same rules we had in second year." There was more than one grimace from the older students at the reminder of the hapless Professor Lockhart, and his ill-fated dueling club. Harry explained further, "The two combatants will continue until one is unable to continue, either by being magically confined, knocked unconscious. However, only disabling hexes are allowed—no disfiguring or otherwise injuring curses allowed. Remember, this is a test only."

"Why didn't you tell us about this last week?" Ernie Macmillan demanded.

"Because we only had the idea over the weekend," Fleur responded for Harry.

"Besides," Harry added, "the lack of preparation makes it a better test of everyone's ability. This way, you have to wing it."

Several thoughtful faces appeared in the group at Harry's words, and he smiled with satisfaction. It appeared that everyone, if not precisely looking forward to their duels, was at least coming around to the idea that they would be useful to measure their ability.

Indicating that the club members should find their names on the board, Harry gave them several moments to look over the tournament board. The room was filled with exclamations of where everyone was seeded, or those who voiced concern about who they were facing in the first round. Speculation also ran rampant, many students speaking of their opinion of how a certain match would end up, or how quickly a person would be defeated, among other things.

The speculation, however, was interrupted when a loud voice rang out over the room.

"Why isn't your name on the board, Potter?"

A quick glance at Roger revealed a glare, not to mention a certain self-righteous arrogance—a combination with which Harry was rightly becoming annoyed. Roger appeared more like Malfoy than ever at that moment. But Harry, who was decidedly not intimidated by Malfoy, would not be intimidated by Davies either, regardless of whatever his recent problem was.

"Because I lead the club," Harry replied, never taking his eyes from the Head Boy. "I'll be watching and taking notes on how everyone does. I can use that to help plan future club meetings."

"And I'll be helping him," added Fleur from his side. He noted her intent stare at the Ravenclaw, and wondered abruptly what was going with Roger. Though Roger had never been precisely friendly—being from a different house and year, Harry had never really had much to do with the other boy at all—Harry had never really had a problem with Roger before. His antipathy had only begun in the past week or two. But what was his problem? Nothing had happened between them of which Harry was aware, and the only person in Harry's group who really knew him was Fleur. Had, something had happened between them?

Still, that was a matter for another time. Harry trusted Fleur and he knew her—she would never betray him by carrying on with Roger. And there was no reason for Roger to be angry at Harry if Fleur had dallied with him. There must be something else happening of which Harry was not aware.

"I think you just don't want to compete because you know you'll look bad," said the Ravenclaw contemptuously. "You'd show everyone here that you're not what your legend says you are."

"What's your problem, Roger?" asked Harry. "To the best of my knowledge we've never had any kind of disagreement or trouble with one another. Why are you suddenly so hostile? Could it be because Fleur is with me now?"

Roger's eyes flashed dangerously, but he merely snorted scornfully. "I just think you ought to put your reputation where your mouth is. Show your adoring fans just what you're made of. If you're not going to be involved yourself, then this tournament is a farce and I won't have anything to do with it."

A burst of murmurs sounded throughout the chamber as the Head Boy faced off against the leader of the defense club, but Harry ignored it. Professor Flitwick appeared to want to say something at that moment, but when Harry looked at him, he closed his mouth and watched the proceedings closely. Harry was the leader of the club and it was important for him to handle this challenge in his own way. Apparently the professor understood that. The look the Charms Professor directed at Davies, however, hinted at the fact that there was undoubtedly a very pointed conversation in Davies' very near future.

Harry turned his head to gaze at his betrothed, who was herself regarding Davies as though he was a very small and annoying insect. She turned to Harry and reading his question answered, "I can take Roger's place in the tournament."

"What good would that do?" scoffed the Head Boy, but not without a smoldering look at the Veela. His frank stare solved a few puzzles in Harry's mind—the boy was obviously either unhappy that he had been supplanted in Fleur's life, or was unhappy that he had not been given further consideration, and he now held it against Harry. "I'm confident in your competence, Fleur. I want Mr. Boy-Who-Lived here to live up to his own reputation."

"I'll tell you what, Roger," said Harry, "since you'd prefer not to participate in the tournament, I'll let you out of it—Fleur can slide into your place instead. She was my choice for first seed anyway."

A number of disbelieving murmurs caught Harry's attention, along with several audible, "but she wasn't very good in the tournament," type statements which made Harry's blood boil.

"Fleur is one of the most talented and competent witches I have ever had the good fortune to know," he snapped, glaring at those who were questioning his betrothed. "She did very well in the first task. For those of you who do not understand Veela, she was at a severe disadvantage in the second task as it was under water. Veela have a natural affinity to fire, which was obviously suppressed in the lake. And in the third task she was attacked by another champion who was under the Imperius. I challenge any of you to do better."

"It's all right, Harry," Fleur soothed him. "I am not offended."

Harry gazed in her beautiful blue eyes and smiled at her. "You don't have to be—I'll be offended in your place." It did not take a genius to note the pleasure in Fleur's eyes at Harry's staunch defense of her.

He turned his attention back to the club. "In any case, you'll be able to see her in action tonight. I'd lay better than even odds that she'll win the tournament."

The members of the summer training group all nodded—they had seen Fleur in action and knew of what she was capable. The rest of the group did not appear to be entirely convinced, but no one said anything further, assuming that Harry would not speak so confidently if he was not certain of what he was saying.

"While this is all very touching, it doesn't address my concern."

Turning back to Roger, Harry regarded him for several moments, identifying the scowl on Roger's face which appeared to be directed at Fleur's hand, which was now resting upon Harry's arm, very familiarly. Very slowly and deliberately, Harry removed the Veela witch's hand from his arm and took it in his own, interlacing his fingers with hers, while favoring her with an affectionate smile. Harry had never been a tactile person—the only touches he had received from his relatives growing up had been a cuff when he had been too slow, or Dudley and his gang beating him up. A touch from a beautiful girl, however, was so much different.

Roger, apparently, got the point, as his scowl deepened and he glared at Fleur in an almost accusatory way.

"Fleur can take your place in the tournament, leaving you free to take me on," said Harry. "We'll run through the tournaments. Then, if you're up to it, you and I can duel at the end."

Roger's smile grew almost feral. "You're on, little man."

Nothing further was said. Harry nodded tightly at Roger and turned to the rest of the group. "Now, let's get this started. We'll have the smaller tournament for the younger group first, then we'll switch to the older years."

"But Harry," said Parvati Patil, "we haven't had a chance to practice or anything."

"What have you been doing attending the club?" Harry asked. "The whole point of having you here is to prepare you for encounters in the real world. If a Death Eater attacks you, I doubt he'll stand aside while you come up with a plan of attack. This is similar. You must improvise."

"I'd prefer not to embarrass myself," Ernie Macmillan grumbled.

"Don't think of it that way," Harry admonished. "Yes this is a tournament. Yes there will be a winner, and half of you will lose your only match. But we're not here to try to embarrass anyone. Look on this as a learning experience instead."

"Sage advice, Mr. Potter," interjected Professor Flitwick. He had approached as Harry was dealing with Davies and the other club members, and was now watching the interaction very carefully. "All of you should remember what Mr. Potter says. I believe he is uniquely qualified to give this instruction, if half of the rumors of his adventures since arriving at Hogwarts are true."

Here he stopped and winked at a red-faced Harry. "And I can tell you that they are not embellished all that much indeed. I for one think that this idea of a tournament is splendid and will be a good test which will show you where you are and how you need to apply yourself to improve. Remember to try your best, but do not be

discouraged if you do not win. I myself had to practice for hours every day to gain my skill. It will be no different for any of you."

With that, all protestations ceased and the attention turned toward the dueling platform. The main event was about to begin.

As there were only eight members of the DA who were fourth year and younger, there would only be seven total matches to determine a champion. Therefore, the first tournament was over very quickly. As the younger members were only in second year (Astoria Greengrass being the lone third year in the club), they were quickly dispatched by the much more knowledgeable fourth years, as Harry had expected.

And with fewer participants—and a much greater confidence in how they stacked up—things went more or less as Harry had expected them to. The only true surprise, if it could be called that, was when Colin Creevey defeated Romilda Vane, who Harry had had reversed in their rankings when drew up the tree. Other than that, he was unsurprised when Ginny defeated Colin in one semi-final, while Luna defeated Greta White in the other, and then Ginny defeated Luna to become the champion of the lower years. Ginny was very handy with her wand, after all, and even her brothers were wary of her infamous Bat-Bogey Hex, not to mention her fiery temper and tendency to hex first and ask questions later.

After the young redhead had wrapped up her match by putting Luna in a body bind, the group cheered, which she accepted as gracefully as she was able, though her red face did almost match her hair. Harry could not miss the looks she was directing at him, and though he was not about to consider as anything other than a little sister—even if he was not already tied to Fleur—he was more than willing to let her know how skillfully she had performed.

Joining her on the platform, Harry handed her a simple trophy he had had Dobby purchase for him earlier in the week. Hermione had already magically added her name to a plaque on the front of the trophy.

"Our winner!" he shouted, raising Ginny's hand in the manner he had seen done on the television, and especially in the home videos of Dudley's boxing matches. The members of the defense club cheered in response. "Good job, Ginny!"

Raising her hand and waving at the rest of the club, Ginny accepted their congratulations, and she and Harry stepped down from the platform. The second tournament was about to start.

With the older years, Harry was not nearly as confident with his rankings as he had been with the younger students. Not only were there four times as many students to rank, but the mix of years—more than half were fifth years—made it difficult at times to judge between different club members. As soon as the board had been revealed, he was unsurprised to hear some grumbling due to the placement of some of the members. Cormac had been vocal about the fact that he should be ranked above most of the other sixth years, though he was in fact seeded below several fifth years, including Hermione and Ron, though Alice Tolipan—who Harry had noted was not especially skilled with her wand—appeared to accept her ranking with little comment.

Once they started, Harry concentrated on refereeing the matches and looking for the tendencies and skills they had talked about when they had begun planning. Immediately in the first match, Fleur had given a sign of what Harry had confidently proclaimed, by dispatching Lavender Brown very quickly. Of course Lavender, who had always seemed to be much more interested in makeup and boys than her wand, was not the most dangerous of opponents. Regardless, she accepted her defeat with some grace and thanked Fleur for showing her a few things, which Fleur graciously reciprocated with some advice and an admonishment to work hard to improve herself.

In the very next match, Harry's words about Cormac were proven to be prophetic, as he was bounced from the tournament by Michael Corner, who Harry felt was definitely one of the best of the fifth years. Of course the arrogant prick was less than gracious in his defeat, claiming to all who would listen—not very many in other words—that he had gone lightly on Michael, and that he would not even be touched if they were to have a rematch.

Hermione and Ron both survived their first matches, Hermione by taking out Zacharias Smith, while Ron defeated Padma Patil. For the rest of the matches, those Harry expected to win did, though Marietta's victory over Terry Boot was a near thing, and Daphne's defeat of Susan was also by the narrowest of margins. In all, the

seventh years all advanced to the second round, as did most of the sixth years, with the exception of the aforementioned Cormac McLaggen—who took to pouting on the sidelines with an injured expression of petulance on his face—and Alice, who took her defeat much more philosophically.

It was the second round, however, which generated the greatest surprise of the evening. All of the remaining seventh years advanced as expected, except for Lee Jordan who was taken down in stunning fashion by Hermione.

As her stunner knocked the affable seventh year from the platform, a shocked silence descended over the room, and then the club erupted into cheers. Embarrassed, Hermione accepted the acclaim and left the platform to be pulled into a jubilant hug by Fleur. Lee, who rose to his feet groggily after being enervated, acknowledged, somewhat ruefully, that he had taken it easy on Hermione, who he saw as a bit of a younger sister. He would not hear anything of any suggestion that Hermione had won the match due to anything other than her own skill, congratulating her warmly, and promising her that he would not go so easy on her the next time.

There was almost another upset in the last match of the second round, though it would not have been as shocking as Hermione's triumph. Blaise Zabini, who Harry had pegged as having a lot of raw power but not a lot of finesse, was almost able to use his power to defeat Katie Bell. It was only through the girl's excellent tactics and her ability to draw the Slytherin into a trap which had enabled her to prevail. Thus, at the end of the second round, there were six seventh years still standing, as well as Katie representing the sixth years, and Hermione as the lone fifth year still alive.

Hermione stood at the side of the dueling platform, playing with her wand nervously as she waited for her next chance to duel. Fleur had just defeated Alicia Spinet to move on to the semi-final round, while the next would feature Nigel against Angelina, in what was already being billed as the battle of the Johnsons.

Overall, Hermione was happy with the progress she had made. She had promised herself that she would improve her skills so that she would be able to help Harry, knowing that his propensity to discover trouble would mean that he needed good and competent friends at his back. She was progressing, she thought, though she would not



have believed at the start of the tournament that she would be able to best an opponent two years her senior, in age, experience, and training. It felt good, though, to succeed and feel as though she was getting better. She wanted to impress Harry and be able to stand with him, and she felt she was making good progress toward that goal.

As Nigel and Angelina took their places on the platform, she found herself studying Harry as he initiated the match. He truly was coming into his own, she decided, and his competence and manners were only equaled by his humility. He had stood up to Roger in a dignified manner, never throwing Roger's accusations back into the git's face. Instead he had calmly faced his accuser, offering a solution to Roger's concern, and above all, refusing to rise to the bait.

In truth, Hermione suspected that Harry, even as a fifth year, was likely superior in defense to anyone here, seventh year or no. Yet Harry was not about to try to aggrandize himself or draw attention to himself. His understated confidence and humility was one of the most appealing traits he could possess—that trait was one of those which made up his character, and one which drew her possibly more than anything else. Well, that and his good looks, his compassion, his willingness to throw himself into danger for others—not that that particular trait did not give her fits at times—his ability to make her feel good about herself at any time...

Who was she kidding? She was in love with her best friend and had been for a long time. She had known it since the summer, but it was becoming more and more obvious that she would never find anyone so compatible with her as Harry was.

That, of course, was her dilemma. Harry was taken, and regardless of Fleur's invitation to allow her to have a relationship with Harry too, she was not certain if she could. She had been brought up to believe in the concept of monogamy, and this idea of sharing Harry was alien to her. She had thought about it in the intervening months—at times she did not think she had thought of much else!—but the inability to come to a decision was something which was generally not a part of her personality. And yet, she was still at a quandary.

Glancing over at Fleur, Hermione noted that the French witch was concentrating on the match, knowing that the winner would be her

next challenge. Fleur did not seem to be bothered by the thought of sharing Harry with Hermione, and perhaps for her it was not so much of a difficult concept. She had been brought up to know that it was at the very least possible for her, after all.

But the fact of the matter was that Hermione still did not know if she could do it—sharing her husband seemed likely to make her... jealous, at the very least, she supposed. It made sense did it not?

"Hermione," a hissing whisper at her side jolted her back to awareness of her surroundings.

She looked around and saw Ron regarding her closely. "Looks like someone's not paying much attention," he jibed, motioning to the contest on the platform.

"I'm facing George next," Hermione responded lamely, as though that explained everything.

"Perhaps," was Ron's dubious answer. "I just thought I'd give you a little advice."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "Advice?"

"Yeah. George is my brother, you know. I've been at the business end of his wand more times than I'd care to admit."

"And?" Hermione pressed him.

"He's devious, but you already knew that. He'll try to lull you to sleep and then catch you with your pants down, and he's good at it. Just remember that George has a tendency to rely on his shielding more than dodging. You may be able to get a spell through if you cast quickly and overwhelm his shield."

Nodding, Hermione thanked Ron for his advice, noting that the previous match had ended with Nigel Johnson emerging as the victor. Once the applause had died out and Angelina had been revived from a stunner, Harry announced the next match and smiled at Hermione.

"Give it to him, Hermione."

"Oh my," George wailed theatrically, "little Harrikins is giving Hermy some pointers. Whatever shall I do?"

"Don't call me Hermy," Hermione growled at the twin, which earned her nothing more than an insolent grin.

"All right, all right," Harry intervened with a shake of his head. "I don't know how you and your brother can go through life without ever being serious."

"It's all in the mindset," was George's gleeful reply. "Perhaps if you concentrated a little, you could manage it yourself."

Shaking his head, Harry stepped to the center of the ring. "Now, I want a clean fight," he drawled, his eyes twinkling with mirth. "No cheap shots, dangerous hexes, and whatever you do, be serious!" he roared, before his wand lit up with a light spell, indicating the beginning of the match.

Hermione immediately went on the offensive, snapping off a stunner and a disarming spell, which George merely grinned at. He allowed them to be absorbed into the shield he quickly cast, while he countered with a body-bind curse, which Hermione dodged. She was not about to be caught with the spell with which she had defeated Malfoy!

Spinning, Hermione countered with a leg-locking hex, followed up by a jelly-legs hex, then ducked out of the way of George's incoming stunning spell. She looked up to see that George had moved to the side, and taken aim at her with a loud disarming spell. Hermione dodged again, almost falling prey to a non-verbal stunning spell which he had slipped in without her noticing.

Hastily conjuring a shield, Hermione allowed George's next two stunners to impact it, noting the fact that the more powerful boy had caused her shield to waver, before she shot off a couple more spells to occupy him, before she stepped up and shouted, "Avis!" A noisy blast, followed by a stream of yellow birds shot out of her wand, and then tore across the room directly at George with Hermione's shouted, "Uppugno!"

George, however, merely grinned at her and dodged the incoming birds, conjured a metal shield and threw it up into the air where it

impacted with most of the birds, causing them to explode and disappear. The remaining few birds were neutralized with a quickly yelled, "Finite Incantatem!"

Hermione had not been idle, however, directing several stunners and binding spells while he was occupied, hoping to punch one through his shield. Just as his shield crashed down, however, George dove to the side, evading her last stunner, and coming up firing. Hermione had no time to rue the fact that her spells missed, however, as George immediately came up on a knee and directed three spells at her. She realized too late that the first was intended to get her to move—nothing more than a simple stunner—while the other two were binders, neatly bracketing his stunner. Understanding came too late, as Hermione dove to her left, right into the incoming spell, which quickly wrapped her up in the conjured ropes. She crashed down to the side of the platform, losing her grip on her wand.

Disappointment filled Hermione as she heard Harry declare George the winner of the duel. She lifted her head to see Harry and George approaching her, Harry with a look of sympathy, while George was one of smug satisfaction, mixed with respect.

A quick finite had Hermione back up on her feet, and she stood and retrieved her wand, knowing she had done her best, but still unhappy she had come up short.

George, however, stepped up to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Good match, little sister!"

Wondering what he was talking about, Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, which he merely responded to with an insolent grin. "Oh come on, Hermione—you're almost like a member of the family. You were brilliant! A couple more years of training and you'll be a nightmare to face on the dueling platform."

"He's right," Harry praised, bringing a bit of a blush to Hermione's cheeks. "You did really well up there, Hermione. I'm proud of you."

The club was cheering for the victor, and George turned and executed an extravagant courtly bow, which generated no small amount of laughter. Hermione followed him off the platform, and was

surprised to be the recipient of so many well-wishers congratulating her for a well-fought duel.

Philosophically, Hermione turned her thoughts inward, as the next match got under way. She would not win this tournament—not that she had expected to—but she had still made a good showing, and had even managed to win against a student two years older than she was. It was a good showing, she decided. She would not fail. She would always be there for Harry, she decided, with the skills and abilities to help in whatever situation he managed to get himself into. And maybe if she could ever come to a decision, there may be more in her future with Harry as well.

In the final duel of the day, Fleur stood up on the platform, looking across at her opponent, one Fred Weasley. In true Weasley twin form, the redhead was smirking across at her with an expression of cocky confidence upon his features.

All in all, it had been a good day for Fleur, her presence in the final match a testament to that fact. Her semi-final against the Slytherin Nigel Johnson had not been an easy one, but in the end she had managed to prevail with a flurry of spells, finally catching him with a Levicorpus jinx before summoning his wand to her to end the match. Nigel had been gracious in defeat, congratulating her, though not warmly, and accepting the fact that he had been beaten squarely.

The other semi-final, however, had been more of an exhibition in silliness than a true duel, the combatants being the two Weasley twins, after all. Jelly-legs hexes, some Weasley invented paint spell, along with tickling hexes and the two boys trying to banish each others clothes had been the order of the day. For all that, they had fought with an almost mindless ferocity, demonstrating extreme competence in their battle, regardless of its rather unorthodox nature. Even George's grumbling at being bested by his closest sibling had been good-natured and funny. They would never change.

Standing across from Fleur, however, Fred appeared to be completely focused on the upcoming match, with none of his typical joking nature had been unleashed. It was clear the twin wanted to win.

For herself, Fleur was anticipating the upcoming battle with relish. Win or lose, she thought, she had vindicated the faith in her which

Harry had expressed at the beginning of the evening. The warmth in his eyes as he had looked at her told her much about the state of their relationship. It was growing into something Fleur had hoped for ever since being bound to this betrothal.

Roger, though, was a different story. He stood to one side even now, smirking in a haughty and disdainful manner at the rest of the club—primarily at Harry, unless she missed her guess. Fleur still had not told Harry of her confrontation with the Head Boy and the way he had tried to get her to cheat on him, partially because she had not found the right moment, and partially because Roger had backed off and left her alone. She supposed it had led her to feel a false sense of security, and had made the necessity of talking to Harry to become less urgent. Now, however, it was clear that she would have to have that discussion with Harry sooner rather than later, as he clearly suspected that something was up. It would have been better had she said something before this had all come to a head...

For now it was time to clear her mind. She desperately wanted to completely vindicate Harry for his words supporting her. Victory would do that.

Harry stood with his wand held up, just off to the side of the platform, and he glanced at each of the combatants in turn. "Are you both ready?" he queried.

Fleur gave him a tight nod and stood in a traditional dueling stance, knees slightly bent, wand extended in front of her, angled toward the floor. When Fred echoed her motion, the tip of Harry's wand lit up, signaling the start of the action.

Pivoting neatly to the side, and thereby evading Fred's opening sally of a pair of stunners, Fleur erected a shield in front of her, while slicing her wand down, with a jerk, and a non-verbal *Glacius*! A sudden icy wind sprang up and howled at Fred, but he merely grinned tightly, and sidestepped it, responding by conjuring a bunch of small rocks and banishing them in her direction.

Fleur darted to one side, avoiding the rocks as they sped towards her in a wide swath, diving to the platform to avoid the outside edge of the spray. Unfortunately, her momentum carried her outside the protective influence of her shield. Fred, noticing this, immediately went on the attack, barking out, "*Incarcerous! Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

Recognizing the attack as the one George had used against Hermione, Fleur rolled to the side of the binding spell, coming up on one knee while shouting out, "Protego!" The stunner headed her way impacted the shield and disappeared, while Fleur once again moved back toward the center of the dueling platform.

Counting on the fact that she now had dual shields protecting the entire left side of her platform, Fleur positioned herself where she thought they overlapped, ignoring Fred's spellfire for a moment. She used her affinity with fire to raise a wall of flame halfway between them. Then, obscured by the flames, she dove to the right side, rolled, and came up firing, snapping off a quick barrage of stunners and binders, spread out over the width of the platform.

A dull thud from the other side of her wall of flame signaled the end of the match, and Fleur pumped a fist into the air, while allowing her wall of flame to die down. On the other side of the platform, the Weasley twin was struggling against the ropes which held him bound.

A large roar erupted from the club, and Fleur gratefully accepted the congratulations, including and particularly enthusiastic hug from her betrothed. Disengaging from her, Harry grabbed her hand and held it up in the air, to which the club members cheered even louder.

Once the noise began to die down, the generally ebullient mood was heightened even further by Fred's plaintive, "Hey, can someone get me out of here?"

"I think I like him where he is!" joked Ron, sending the room into even further fits of laughter.

Fred, however, merely pouted at being made sport of, though Fleur sensed his response was good-natured. That likely did not preclude revenge in the way of a prank on his younger sibling, she thought. Taking pity on the redhead, Fleur waved her wand in his direction, dispelling the ropes, and allowing the final Weasley to rise to his feet.

Wasting no time at all, Fred rushed up to Fleur and grabbed her up in a great bear hug, lifting her up and twirling her around enthusiastically. "Nice one, Fleur!" he exclaimed when he finally let her down. "You really threw me for a loop with that wall of fire!"

The energetic discussion continued on for several more moments, as Fleur basked in the pleasure of her victory. Clearly, the idea of a tournament had been a complete success, and Fleur did not doubt that it would be repeated again in the future.

Finally, however, Harry held up his hands for quiet, and addressed the milling club members who were gathered around.

"Thank you, everyone, and great work, Fleur!" he shouted, once again inciting the roar of the assembled students. He produced the second trophy, which Hermione discreetly handed to him, and presented it to Fleur, who held it high in the air to the enthusiastic cheers of the club.

"It sounds like the idea was a success!" Harry said when the applause died down. Let's talk about it for a few moments. First, I'd like to thank everyone for giving it their best effort. I know that it was difficult for some of you, especially since some of the fifth years had to start out by going up against the seventh years."

Fleur noticed a few rueful expressions at that statement, primarily from fifth years such as Parvati and Lavender, who had been ranked quite low. No one seemed to be upset by the way it had turned out, though—in fact, she thought she recognized a determination to do better on most faces.

"I think we'll start doing more practice duels in the club," Harry continued, "and everyone can practice against others of their own skill level. And the next time we hold a tournament, maybe we'll have three brackets, or just divide everyone up differently."

"That would be a relief," grumbled Lavender. "Going up against Fleur for my first match was not a lot of fun."

Harry acknowledged Lavender's comment with a smile, and a bit of praise. "Maybe not, but you did well, Lavender.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk about what we saw in the matches before we break up. Can anyone tell me what you learned from tonight's duels?"

"They were all very quick," said Terry Boot.



Harry nodded. "Very good. Yes, duels have a tendency to be over very quickly. Throw away any images you have in your mind about epic duelists locked in battle for hours—in practice, a duel is short and decisive. And don't hold back, or you'll give your opponent an opening to finish you off."

"Mr. Potter is right," Professor Flitwick said from the side of the room. "Even in a professional dueling arena, where both combatants are supremely talented and evenly matched, a duel typically lasts less than three minutes."

To the Charms Professor's side, the Headmaster stood, watching the proceedings with some interest, not to mention an unmistakable approval. When he had arrived Fleur did not know, but she suspected that he had seen the final match, which made her feel unaccountably bashful.

"What about styles?" Harry asked, pulling the attention of the group back to him.

"I noticed that a lot of people lost when their shields failed them," said Ron.

"Exactly!" said Harry, thanking Ron for his insight. "As a respected Auror once told me, the best defense against any spell is to be somewhere else when the spell arrives. I think we'll begin to focus on dodging and techniques for moving around in the field of battle. A shield charm can be used very effectively, but it should not be relied on. Remember, a shield will not stop an Unforgivable."

"I also noticed that a lot of people relied more on spells than transfiguration or other tactics," said Susan.

"Very good, Susan," said Harry. "Most of the seventh years used a mix of conjuration, transfiguration, and other tactics in their duels, but the younger students tended to stick to spells."

"That is partially due to their more advanced work in school, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster. "That does not necessarily mean that the younger students cannot apply such measures to their tactics. They will, of course, have a much smaller repertoire from which to draw, however, until they become more experienced in their studies."

"Thank you, Headmaster. This is another area we will start to work on. Most of you were surprised that Hermione was able to defeat Lee—sorry for picking on you, Lee," Harry added to the seventh year.

"It's a good object lesson," said the affable Gryffindor. "Go right ahead."

Grinning, Harry continued, "Hermione was one of the few fifth years who used an array of battle tactics. It doesn't hurt at all either, that she knows so many spells."

Hermione blushed at the praise yet again, but Harry continued speaking. "That is part of the reason why she did so well. We'll work on that in the coming weeks. Just remember that part of dueling—and fighting in a battle—is being aware of your surroundings. But remember that creativity and mobility will also assist you."

"A certain amount of raw power doesn't hurt either," Daphne chimed in.

"True," Harry agreed, "but raw power can be overcome by finesse and strategy. Don't assume that simply because you have more available power than another that you will automatically have an edge in a fight."

"Also consider that there is no way to measure a person's magical ability," Dumbledore once again interjected. "We know in a general sense how powerful we all are, but it is also known that a person's power level can fluctuate based on emotion, how rested the person is, and a number of other factors."

Cho Chang hesitantly raised her hand, speaking when Harry motioned to her. "But wasn't Fleur's wall of fire unfair? She used her Veela talent with fire, I assume."

"Certainly not!" Fred objected. "You have to use every advantage in a fight—she disoriented me with that wall, and I never considered the fact that she could fire spells through it."

"That is correct," said Professor Flitwick. "While I would not expect her to make use of some of her... other abilities, anyone here could

do what she did. She can do it faster and more efficiently. That is an advantage that she should make use of."

Appreciating the support, Fleur nodded her head. "My affinity to fire is part of my Veela heritage, but it is not dissimilar to what all of you can do. But in a duel, I'd never make use of my allure. If I was fighting against Death Eaters? I'd use any advantage I had."

A general murmur of agreement rippled through the ranks of the club, putting to rest any further comment on the fairness of Fleur's tactics. Harry spent the next few moments going over some of the things he saw from the duels, and dishing out a generous measure of praise for the way they had all fought. He specifically dwelt on the fact that both tournaments had been won by girls, and that the boys should not hold back or automatically assume that they would win if facing a member of the fairer sex.

Fleur was only half paying attention to Harry's words. Instead, she was focused on the side of the room where Roger stood leaning up against the wall, projecting a discontented and angry air.

The meeting was about to break up when his voice rang over the room. "So, are we going to get on with this, Potter? Or are you afraid to duel me?"

The instant before Harry turned to face his antagonist, Fleur thought she detected a dangerous glint in his eye. Harry's ire was clearly aroused.

A/N:

1. It's a day late, but I hope that everyone enjoyed the chapter, and that no one is too upset at the small cliff-hanger at the end!

2. I'm curious about everyone's opinion. I consider the action sequences to be my major weakness, and I sit in front of my computer rewriting, over-analyzing, and generally driving myself nuts about whether I've described my action sequences well enough (generally assuming that they suck, of course). This covers all genres - from lightsaber duels and battles in Star Wars, to magical duels in Harry Potter, to other similar sequences in my own writing. To anyone who is planning to respond, I would like to know what

you thought of the two duels I described in detail. Any suggestions for improvements?

3. No, I did not describe the tournament in minute detail as I've seen some authors do. The chapter did have several purposes, none of which included artificially inflating my word count by going through everything with a fine tooth comb, or focusing too much on the duels to the detriment of everything else. While it is important that Harry is training everyone and that they are learning quickly, the tournament was a means to an end, and not the end itself.

4. Yes, Fleur won the tournament. I've always thought that she was given the short end of the stick in the books - she never seemed to be championship material the way that JKR wrote her. I've tried to make her a little more competent, allow her to live up to her champion status a little more, and give a reasonable explanation for why she did not do so well in the Tri-Wizard.

5. To anyone looking for the next chapter of my Star Wars story, it is complete, but I still need to go over it and tidy it up. Hopefully I'll be able to post it tomorrow.

6. Some of you may have already noticed, but I turned off anonymous reviews. I'm sorry if you'd like to review anonymously, but I've had it with people hiding behind anonymous reviews to flame and belittle. The one that finally broke the camel's back was rude, incredibly stupid, somewhat incomprehensible, and even slightly threatening. Anyone who wants to say something negative about any of my stories in the future will have to sign their name to it. I've had enough. For those who would like to blame it on someone, wudufubbqsauce is the jerk who posted the review that finally did it - blame him.

The sad thing about this is the fact that it's really a case of the very few ruining it for everyone else. The worst of the negative reviews are almost always unsigned. And even though the actual number is relatively small (probably less than ten out of over 1500 reviews), I've simply reached the end of my tether. So, to those who never say anything unless it's negative, and always do it anonymously, you will have to sign in the next time you want to say something. If you don't, I certainly don't consider it to be any loss.

End rant.

## Chapter 25 – A Lover and a Fighter

"No, Davies. I had not forgotten."

Turning slowly, Harry faced his accuser, one eyebrow lifted in question. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Roger scoffed.

"I just don't see that you have a way to win," said Harry.

Roger's intense glare seemed to bore right into Harry. "Pretty tough words for a little twerp who has been perched on a pedestal all his life. You've never had to do anything to prove you deserve it, and yet you think you'll beat me without any problem?"

Harry waved his hand dismissively. "That's not what I mean," he said, impatient that Roger kept willfully misunderstanding him. "We both know you're a seventh year and I'm only a fifth. What I mean is that I don't see any way for you to come out ahead in this. If you win, well, you're supposed to since I'm only a fifth year. If I win, you get humiliated by losing to a fifth year."

"Oy!" Lee Jordan's voice broke out over the group. "I lost to a fifth year too!"

His attempt at levity fell a little flat, as most of the club was focused on the showdown between their leader and the Head Boy. A quick glance around him showed very few smiles at Lee's interruption, and that the sentiment appeared to be with him, if the nods and expressions of discontent with Roger's behavior were any indication.

"Ah, but you're forgetting the whole 'Boy-Who-Lived' angle," Roger crowed. "You're not just some ordinary fifth year."

Harry allowed all of his disdain to seep over his features. "In one minute you decry my fame, and in the next say you want to profit from it, Roger. Seems to me you want it both ways."

"I didn't come up with this ridiculous Boy-Who-Lived nonsense."

"Neither did I!" Harry rejoined. "It all happened when I was a baby, in case you've forgotten. Ask Hermione or Ron or any of my other friends—I want this fame no more than I want Voldemort after me."

"You sure don't act like it."

"Maybe you just don't know me."

"Harry," Fleur interjected into the argument, "you will never to convince him. He has made up his mind."

"You might as well get on with this," added Hermione.

A general murmur of agreement rippled through the club members, and Harry acknowledged the girls' points.

"All right then. Fleur, will you referee?"

"I will adjudicate the match."

Turning, Harry noted the approach of the Headmaster and Professor Flitwick. Both were regarding the two combatants with severity, though Harry thought the greater portion of the professors' disapprobation was directed at the Head Boy.

"Are you certain you wish to continue with this?" Dumbledore asked, looking in turn at both Harry and Roger.

Harry shrugged to indicate his complete ambivalence, while Roger, in a soft and much more diffident voice, agreed that they should proceed.

"Very well, then," said the Headmaster. "I will allow it in light of your willingness to proceed."

"It's not a bad thing, professor," Harry assured him. "I'm the leader of this club, so it makes sense that I have to prove that I know what I'm talking about."

Dumbledore regarded Harry and smiled. "I dare say that is a good thing in a leader, Harry. However, I cannot say that I approve of the reasons for this challenge, nor do I believe that it is merely to prove that you 'know what you are talking about.'"

The Headmaster's pointed glance in Roger's direction as he said this was missed by no one, though Roger did a credible job of appearing unaffected by the mild rebuke. For Harry it mattered little—his reasons for accepting the challenge were no more and no less than he had stated, and he did not fear the result. At worst, a loss would seem like an inevitability, easily explained by their relative ages and levels of education. A win, however, would cement his ability to lead the club and do away with any further dissention which might arise in the future.

"If you will both take your places, I believe we should begin," Dumbledore prompted. "It is getting close to curfew and I would like you all to return to your dorms before the remaining time has elapsed."

With a glance at the Head Boy, Harry vaulted up onto the platform and turned to face his adversary. Roger sported a Malfoy-esque sneer, clearly pleased with himself at his success in provoking this confrontation. A glance to the side revealed Fleur's discontented glare at her former date, though when she noticed Harry's gaze, she directed a brilliant smile at him, making him feel warm all over. Harry had always thought that Hermione was his biggest supporter; now it seemed as though she had competition in that role.

Harry smiled back at his betrothed, wagging his eyebrows in her direction, to which she responded by rolling her eyes and directing several significant glances at his opponent. "Concentrate on him!" she mouthed at him, nodding her head in the Head Boy's direction.

Taking the point, Harry grinned and bowed slightly at her, before pivoting and facing Roger. He peered at Roger for a moment, noting the insolence in his casual stance, which completely belied the expression of anger on his face. The Head Boy had obviously witnessed the exchange and was clearly upset at the feelings the two had conveyed.

"Are you ready to be exposed for a phony?" Roger taunted.

Harry, now certain that Roger's dislike was founded in jealousy, nodded tightly in the Headmaster's direction. "I'm sure the others will judge me for more than what happens in this little fracas."

"Now let's make this a pleasant affair, shall we?" Dumbledore's deceptively mild voice interrupted their conversation and reduced the tension slightly. "It is not considered good form to taunt your opponent."

"I suggest you both focus on your spells," Flitwick added.

Harry nodded at the charms professor and assumed a dueling stance, which Roger immediately copied. The glare was still present on the Head Boy's face, but it was now tempered with a sense of determination. Roger clearly wanted to win this match to vindicate his claims.

"Are you both ready?"

When Harry and Roger both indicated their willingness to begin, the Headmaster's wand lit up with a light spell and the match was on.

Shifting instantly to the offensive, Roger snapped off a couple of stunners, and a banishing spell, trying to knock Harry off the platform and win the duel quickly. Harry merely smiled and sidestepped the attacks, responding with a disarming charm, and two stunners of his own, which Roger blocked and dodged.

Undeterred, Roger continued to attack, throwing an array of stunners, binders, and other offensive spells at Harry, who continually dodged, throwing up shields to augment his defense. Rolling to the side, Harry unleashed his own attacks, focusing on disarming spells and stunners, which Roger deflected or dodged.

The opening attacks thus thwarted, the match settled down into a rhythm of attacks and counter attacks, largely designed by each to take the measure of his opponent and identify weaknesses and tendencies. In Roger, Harry grudgingly had to admit that he faced a formidable opponent. As a Ravenclaw, it was expected that he would be knowledgeable and clever, with an impressive repertoire of spells and a healthy imagination from which to base his attacks. He was competent and clever, and this was clearly the reason why he was Head Boy, as Harry could feel the effects of his assaults and his unwavering determination to prove his point.

He was not, however, so easy to admire in his other attributes, specifically with respect to his insistence on attacking Harry, which



appeared to be nothing more than jealousy and petulance. Harry had never really had much contact with Roger before the start of the year, and had never truly become familiar with him. He had always appeared somewhat distant in those few instances in which Harry had witnessed his interactions, and though his behavior of late had been downright nasty, he had never shown himself to be especially vindictive or ignorant in nature.

That had all changed with his recent actions towards not only Harry, but to Fleur as well, who truly did not deserve his disdain. Harry was not certain if Roger had simply hidden this facet of his personality or if it had recently emerged, and he did not know exactly what Roger's problem was—though he suspected strongly that it had something to do with Fleur—but his most recent behavior suggested a disturbing lack of any respect for the French witch. Perhaps Roger felt that it was only in her nature as a Veela to respond to any man's overtures in an amorous fashion—if so, Harry could only be disgusted with his prejudice.

Even more disconcerting—to Dumbledore too, if the frown Harry detected on his face when he had a brief moment to look at him was any indication—was the constant stream of invective Roger spouted during their duel, or at least when he was not shouting out his spells. He was certainly not pulling any punches, asserting his opinion on Harry, Fleur, and anything else which came to mind, all while sporting that same smug smirk with which he had begun the match. Harry longed to wipe it off his face!

"How does it feel to be in second place, Potter?" Roger sneered as he conjured a strong wind which buffeted Harry. He followed up with a stunner and a bludgeoning curse, which Harry all neatly avoided.

"I cannot imagine what you mean," responded Harry, replying with a leg-locker and several conjured birds which he directed at Roger.

The Head Boy merely laughed at Harry's attempts and dispelled them, before responding with his own attacks. "I just wondered how it would be to get the Veela, after I've already had her."

"I know exactly what happened between you and Fleur," was Harry's cold reply. His answering stunner was highly overpowered, blowing through Roger's shield and narrowly missing him as he dodged out

of the way. "Unfortunately—for you—it was much less than you have imagined to be. I have complete confidence in Fleur."

Roger's responding banishing curse was wildly aimed and did not come near Harry. Harry smiled grimly, knowing that Roger's strategy of angering him was backfiring on the Head Boy. Harry fired a leg-locker at the smirking Head Boy, barely missing him as Roger responded.

"You wish, Potter. The Veela is delectable, after all. I can understand why you engineered your engagement to her."

"You talk to much, Davies," Harry growled while firing a reductor at Roger, then bracketing it with a stunner and a Confundus, which barely missed him.

"Of course, due to her... reputation at Beauxbatons, I expect I was not the first either."

Allowing a stunner splash against his shield, Harry slashed his wand forward, yelling, "Aguamenti!"

Roger's laugh of disdain turned to concern, however, as Harry followed the water spell up with a quick, "Glacius!"

The jet of water which had pooled about Roger's feet instantly froze under the lashing of the frigid jet of air, freezing the Head Boy's shoes to the floor. Roger flailed his arms desperately, trying to maintain his balance while at the same time attempting to thaw the ice. The attempt was almost comical, though Harry could not laugh, given the anger he felt for Roger's vile words. He was able to put the Head Boy away and end the fight with an almost lazy, "Incarcerous!"

The spell impacted his opponent, throwing him off his feet—minus his shoes which stayed stuck to the floor—and threw him headlong off the platform to lie motionless on the floor.

"I told you—you talk too much," Harry rasped as his wand arm dropped to his side. The match had been longer than any of the other ones which had been fought that evening—with the possible exception of the Weasley twins' laugh-fest—and it had left Harry completely spent.

The silence in the room lasted an instant before the cheering of the club members shattered the silence of the aftermath of the duel. Harry only caught a brief hint of movement before he was assaulted by twin blurs—one brown, the other light blond—as both of his closest friends latched onto him from either side.

"I knew you could do it," Fleur laughed in his ear. Hermione just hugged him tightly.

"Well done, Mr. Potter!" Professor Flitwick approached through the murmuring throng. "I see that Albus did not exaggerate in the slightest when he told me of your prowess. Very well done indeed!"

Ducking his head, his cheeks flaming, Harry was only able to mumble that he had simply done his best. The professor, however, was having none of it.

"I believe that you may be far too self-effacing for your own good, Mr. Potter. You must learn to accept praise when it is due, and in the matter of your dueling skills, it is most certainly warranted!"

"I want to see what would happen if Harry and Fleur dueled!" Ron exclaimed.

Of course, this began a series of discussions among the assembled club members, which gradually reached a crescendo of noise, with a near unanimous expression of excitement at the prospect of one final duel between the two undefeated leaders of the club.

"At the risk of offending all those present," the voice of the Headmaster cut over the noise, "I fear that it is too close to curfew to indulge in such a display."

Groans and protests ran through the crowd, but Dumbledore was adamant. "You shall all have another chance to witness such a spectacle, I am sure."

As the group quieted, Harry noticed Roger—who had been released, presumably by the Headmaster—standing behind Dumbledore, his head bowed. The fight appeared to have gone out of the Head Boy altogether.

"Good fight, Roger," Harry said, deciding it was better to be gracious in victory. He extended his hand as a gesture of goodwill toward the other boy.

Roger, however, did not take the offered olive branch. His head snapped up and he glared at Harry. The hatred in his gaze was evident for all to see. He snapped something under his breath which sounded suspiciously like, "You got lucky!" and then Roger turned on his heel and stalked from the room, his head held high and proud.

Harry shrugged, understanding that Roger was not likely to forgive or forget, and he resolved to ignore the boy from then on. He did not, however, miss the significant look the Headmaster directed at the Charms Professor, after which Flitwick once again congratulated Harry, Fleur, and Ginny for their victories and then exited the room. If Harry were to guess, he suspected that Roger would be having several very uncomfortable chats with both his head of house, and with the Headmaster before the week was out.

"I must commend you all," Dumbledore said, ignoring Roger's behavior. "Your matches were very well fought, and you all showed glimpses of what your potential.

"And well done to Harry, and all who help him with the club," Dumbledore continued, smiling at Harry and his friends. "This tournament was a splendid idea, one which I am certain you will make use of again in the future."

Slapping Harry on the back, Dumbledore took his leave with an admonishment for everyone to proceed to their dorms as soon as may be.

The meeting broke up soon after, the club members leaving to make their way to their respective dorms, the sounds of excited chatter echoing down the hallways of the old school.

Harry's core group, however, did not break up immediately with the rest.

"You sure showed Roger a thing or two," one of the twins said.

He was followed up by his brother. "Freezing his shoes to the floor was inspired."

"As inventive a prank as something we might have come up with."

"There's hope for you yet!"

Harry flashed them a grin and acknowledged their compliments with a grin. He then nonchalantly polished his fingernails on his shirt, and put his hand out as though to admire them. "What can I say? It appears that some of us have it, while others—"

"...like our esteemed Head Boy, pretend they have it!" Ron finished, to the general laughter of the group. Several of the female members were seen to roll their eyes, however, at the boys' posturing, though it was obvious that it was just for show, and more good-natured than mean-spirited.

"I'd like to know what's gotten into Roger," said Neville, to which several of the group nodded their heads in agreement.

Harry's eyes flickered to Fleur's face and though her expression gave nothing away, there was something in her eyes which suggested that there was a conversation about the Head Boy in their immediately future. Harry, knowing that Fleur did not and would never betray him, was not precisely concerned. He was, however, curious as to why she had not really brought the subject up with him.

"Oh come now, Neville, it's obvious," one of the twins said with a snort.

"Plain as the nose on your face," chimed in the other.

"You see, it's clear that Roger has a bad case of Harry-induced jealousy, otherwise known as Boy-Who-Lived Envy."

"Harry's got the skill, the talent, and now," the second twin continued with a sly glance in Fleur's direction, "he's got Roger's Yule Ball date on his arm."

"It's got to be hard on the Head Boy's ego."

"Will you two ever be serious?" Daphne demanded with a roll of her eyes.

"Nope."

"Sirius is Harry's godfather."

Several groans met the twins' pun, but it was obvious from the identical grins the two sported, that the general reaction did not bother them in the slightest.

"They're not really funny," said Tracey with a sly glance at the twins, "but they may have a point."

"Hey!" the twins cried in unison. "I'll have you know that we are very funny!"

"What he said," said the other, pointing at his brother.

"All right you two," admonished Harry, though he was fighting back a grin. "Pipe down already."

Turning back to the group from the clearly unrepentant twins, he said, "I just hope that Roger will let up after tonight."

"Who wants to bet that he doesn't come back to the club?" Ron asked with a grin.

"I wouldn't want to take that bet," said Neville.

"I'd say the Head Boy will be having a little talk with the Headmaster," opined Daphne. "If the way Flitwick and Dumbledore were looking at him is any indication."

Harry just shook his head. "I don't care much about that. I just want him to back off; he's becoming a distraction."

Murmurs of agreement sounded all around. The group broke up soon after that, dispersing to their house groups—curfew was quickly approaching, after all. Unfortunately, trouble of a different kind awaited them once they stepped from the Room of Requirement.

Harry was chatting with Hermione and Ron, while Fleur—who had not yet let go of his hand—walked on his other side, when he was surprised by a voice addressing him.

"Potter!"

Knowing that voice anywhere, Harry turned and regarded the Malfoy scion, who was approaching them. For a change, Malfoy sported little of his usual expression of disdain or distaste, though it was so ingrained in the boy that Harry doubted it would ever completely disappear. Rather, he was regarding Harry in an uncharacteristically serious manner, one which Harry usually did not associate with Malfoy.

"Malfoy," Harry replied neutrally, deciding that if the Slytherin was going to be civil, that he would respond in like manner. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Daphne and Tracey—the only two Slytherins who had remained after the bulk of the club had left—had stopped to watch the confrontation. "What can I do for you?"

A grimace passed over Malfoy's face, as though he was about to do something distasteful, and knowing the ponce, if it had something to do with Harry, it likely was.

"I hear you have a club."

"News travels fast," Harry commented to Hermione. "A toad leaves, the need for secrecy disappears, and suddenly the news is all over the school."

Hermione said nothing in response. She merely nodded and stared at Malfoy, as though attempting to determine just what was his game.

Malfoy to his credit glanced at Hermione and appeared to swallow back some retort or another. Harry, who had just about heard everything the Slytherin had to offer, could almost imagine what he had wanted to say. It made Harry suspicious; this was not Malfoy's normal behavior.

"Well, I'll be joining your club," the Slytherin continued. "You only meet on Wednesday nights, right?"

Harry would not have been more surprised if Malfoy had suddenly announced his intention to give up his magic, donate his father's

fortune to Muggle charity, and announce his engagement with his father's house-elf.

"You want to join our club," Harry repeated slowly, so as to ensure he had heard Malfoy correctly.

"I think you may be suffering from hearing loss," Malfoy sneered. "I don't want to join your club; I'm joining your club. What time do you meet?"

For the time being, Harry ignored his assertion. "Let me get this straight—you actually want to join a club which is run by a Half-blood, and taught by a bunch of Blood Traitors and those who you consider your inferiors."

"That just about sums it up," Malfoy drawled. "Except for the part about me wanting to join. It's a school club—I'll join it if I want."

He appeared to be quite smug about what he considered his right to do as he wished, but Harry still ignored his assertion. "Why?" he demanded.

"It's a school club, Potter," Malfoy said, his tone suggesting he thought Harry was mentally challenged. "I have the right to join if I want to."

"No, I mean why do you want to join?" Harry clarified impatiently. "Given what you think of all of us, I'd assume you think you know better and could teach us a thing or two."

"I probably can."

"Isn't it amazing how people bluster and don't realize how ignorant they are?" Ron said in a stage whisper.

Though he glowered at the youngest Weasley male, Malfoy airily turned his nose up and pointedly focused on Harry. "Our Defense instructor left something to be desired. Though I'm not supremely confident in my own abilities, I figure a little more practical practice would be good."

Several snorts and chuckles sounded around them, but Harry kept his attention on the Slytherin and considered the situation. Malfoy



was certainly not excited about joining the club—he had portrayed it as an inevitability due to his perceived 'right' to do whatever he wanted. But it was clear that simply speaking to Harry without all the usual insults was not something he enjoyed. The question was why he wanted to join at all—the Malfoy Harry knew would have spurned the whole thing as a waste for someone as obviously superior as he was. Even worse, it was being run by a bunch of uppity Gryffindors. No, there was more to this than simply a desire to catch up in his work, and Harry had a sneaking suspicion he knew who was behind it. Regardless, it did not change the fact that he would not give Malfoy the time of day, to say nothing of his instinct to teach his worst persecutor how to get the upper hand.

"Well, when do you meet?" Malfoy demanded.

"No," was Harry's cold response.

The Slytherin gazed at him in confusion. "What do you mean, 'no'? Are you not meeting again? Have you taught them everything within your vaunted repertoire already? Are you now all experts who have no need to practice? I should have figured a bunch of Blood Traitors and lesser beings wouldn't be able to do anything right."

Malfoy was nothing if not predictable. When in doubt, fall back on the staple of tired insults and bravado. Harry decided he was not going to fall for it and get into a heated argument with the boy—it would serve no purpose.

"I meant no, you cannot join the club."

"What do you mean I can't join?" Malfoy queried, his brows furrowed in confusion.

"I'm not certain how I can make it any clearer," Harry said. "I run the club, I have the final say in who joins and who doesn't join, and I am telling you that you are not welcome. In fact, I believe that you are just about the last person I would ever allow into the club. Mordred himself would be preferable to you. Now, was there anything else you wanted?"

"Perhaps you are not familiar with the rules of this school, being a Half Blood," Draco enunciated, as though explaining something to some recalcitrant and particularly obtuse child. "Of course, growing

up amongst the Muggles is not in your favor either. The fact of the matter is that you have no right to deny me from joining your little club. All clubs at Hogwarts are open to all students."

"And perhaps you know less than you think you do," rejoined Harry. "As usual, you take faulty and incomplete information and try to bluster your way through by intimidation. Actually, all clubs are open to every student unless the Headmaster approves the formation of an invitation only club. He has, ergo, no, you can't join."

"There is no such rule!" Malfoy, predictably, was flustered, and had fallen back on his typical brand of petulance to get his own way. His attempt at his previous composure was now badly frayed.

"There certainly is. If you don't believe me you can go see Professor Dumbledore."

Sputtering, Malfoy had nothing to say to that, and Harry sensed that he had not expected to be rebuffed and was not completely certain of how to handle the experience. Very likely the boy had hardly ever been told no in his life, and this did not even take into account all the times his parents had filled his head with exaggerated impressions of his own superiority. He was learning a valuable lesson, though Harry doubted whether he would learn it at all.

"Look Malfoy, I've only invited those who I know I can trust to the club, and you certain don't fit into that mold."

"But you invited Greengrass and Davis, and the other Slytherins," Malfoy blustered. "Are you trying to tell me that you trust them?"

"I'm not about to justify anything to you of all people," Harry responded. "Now, I've already asked you once, but you didn't answer; why do you want to join anyway?"

"Does it matter why I want to join?"

Harry threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. "Is he for real?"

"It depends," was Ron's sarcastic answer to his rhetorical question. "He's a real git, if that's what you mean."

"No one asked you, Weasley," Draco snapped. "If I wanted the opinions of charity cases, I would donate a few knuts to your welfare fund."

"Look Malfoy—" Ron began while stepping forward threateningly.

But Harry was not about to allow this to devolve into a physical confrontation. "Of course it matters why, Malfoy," Harry said loudly, motioning to Ron to stand down. "Your continual yapping about your own superiority and your support for your stupid dark lord puts you on the opposite side of the fence. That as much as anything is why I won't train you."

Though Malfoy appeared unable to find a reply to that, Harry decided to have a little fun with the ponce. "I'll tell you what," Harry said, "I'll tell you a story."

"Why would I want to listen to a story from you, Scarhead?" Malfoy demanded.

"Because it concerns you, git," snapped Harry in response. He thought for a moment before he adopted a storyteller's voice. Here was a chance to embarrass the git without any consequences, and Harry was not about to pass up the opportunity.

"You see, Malfoy, there once was a young man who attended a school in a remote location. He was a brilliant chap really, good in his studies, popular, had a gorgeous girlfriend, that kind of thing."

"I'm warning you, Potter..." Malfoy said menacingly.

Harry ignored him. "But life was not all rosy for our hero," he continued. "He had the normal teenage worries and concerns, not to mention an insane megalomaniac after his head. But he also had to put up with a git who considered it his mission in life to do whatever it took to make the hero's life miserable."

"Potter!" Malfoy cried.

"Really, Draco, old chum, you do talk too much," Harry drawled. "Now where was I?" He gazed upward for several moments as though deep in thought before he turned again toward the Malfoy

scion—who was by now almost purple with indignation—and continued speaking.

"You see, though the two did not get along in the slightest and there had never been even a hint of a truce between them, one day, the git asked the hero for help to improve his skills. The hero, being far too trusting and hoping that his nemesis would finally get over his grudge agreed and proceeded to train the git until he gained some semblance of competence.

"Are you following me, Malfoy?" Harry demanded with a smirk.

"Is there a point to this long-winded drivel?"

"Of course!" Harry exclaimed. "I was just getting to that. Because you see, after the hero had taught his enemy to better himself, the git tried to use that knowledge to stab him in the back."

Harry grinned at Malfoy's near apoplexy and continued slyly, "Of course the git was still defeated as the hero, though trusting, was not completely foolish, and did not teach the git everything he knew. Besides, the git was not even close to the hero in terms of competence or ability, so it wouldn't have mattered if he had shown him everything. Still, it was somewhat foolish to assume that the git could change, as he had proven himself time and time again to be a bigoted creep with no redeeming qualities."

By now Harry's friends were all smiling and more than a few snickers could be heard at Harry's obvious and outrageous story. On one level Harry knew that what he was doing was unkind, but on another, he was happy to finally be getting some payback for all the times that Malfoy had made his life miserable.

Though he was visibly furious, Harry suspected that the only reason Malfoy had not whipped out his wand by now was the fact that he was alone against Harry and all of his friends. He would have to be extra careful in the next few days as he would not put it past the git to try to hex him when he was not expecting it. Luckily, Harry had grown to expect it at any time—especially when the Slytherin thought he could do it when Harry was unaware—so he was used to watching the Slytherin closely.

"Are you quite finished?" Malfoy growled.

"Really, Malfoy, I knew you were dense, but I didn't know you were this stupid. I'll make it clear so that even you can understand—I'm not going to teach you how to defeat me, even though you and I both know that you will never be able to match me."

"My father will hear about this," Malfoy threatened, repeating an oft used refrain. It was, in fact, the first time Harry had heard it from Malfoy this term.

"I'm counting on it," Harry responded. "I'm pretty sure 'dear Daddy' put you up to this, and I know that Lucky Lucy never blows his nose without the Dork Lord's express permission."

"You'll pay for this, Potter!" Malfoy threatened.

"Just like I paid all the other times you made that threat," Harry rejoined dismissively. "Now, why don't you piss off and go kiss Voldy's arse again? Speaking this much to you all in one go makes me want to go bleach my brain."

Malfoy directed a withering glare at him before he turned and stalked off in a snit. Harry watched him to make sure he would not pull anything stupid before he resumed walking with his friends, most of whom congratulated him on his disposal of the hated Slytherin.

Hermione, however, directed a worried look at him before speaking. "Harry, umm... should you wind him up like that?"

"Probably not," Harry admitted. "But it was pretty satisfying."

"Satisfying or not, it is really not very kind," added Fleur. "You are just pulling yourself down to his level."

Sighing, Harry nodded and agreed that they were likely right. It had only been in the past several months that he had gained a certain level of confidence that he had begun pushing back at Malfoy in such a manner. It was not surprising to note that pushing the boy's buttons was eminently satisfying, but there was also something to be said for taking the high road and not getting caught up in Malfoy's own game.

"I suppose you're right. I guess I just let myself get carried away—he's been a git the whole time I've been at Hogwarts and sometimes it's nice to get a little payback."

"Harry," Fleur said softly, but affectionately, "I know he has been a thorn in your side for years, and I know you have every right to give him a taste of his own medicine, but I do not think you need to stoop to his level."

"Aw, does that mean no more rubbing the Quidditch match in Malfoy's face?" one of the twins asked playfully.

"Yes!" said Hermione. "They deserve it, but you shouldn't lower yourselves to behaving like they do."

"You take the fun out of things sometimes, Hermione," Ron grumbled.

"But she's right," Ginny said. "We are the good guys, after all."

"Good, bad, it's all semantics," Harry responded with a grin. "I much prefer 'us' and 'them'. It's very clear and doesn't mix morality up in the situation."

The group laughed at Harry's words before they dispersed for the evening, each house separating into its own group and starting back toward their own dormitories. For Harry, he spent the journey back to the dorms thinking about what Hermione and Fleur had said. Yes, Malfoy deserved it and yes, it was fun at times, but Harry had to admit that he had begun to behave in a rather Malfoy-esque manner recently, and it was not something that had ever been part of his personality. There was something to be said for restraint, especially when every word he spoke would likely make it back to Voldemort's ears.

On second thought, Harry admitted to himself with a grin, Malfoy was not likely to relate the entire confrontation, as it would undoubtedly cast himself in a less than a good light to either his father, or his father's master. And if there was one thing that the blond ponce could not stomach, it was the thought of his image taking a hit. No, Malfoy would likely tell them nothing other than the fact that he had been rebuffed.

Once they had arrived back at the Gryffindor common room, Harry and Fleur said good night to their fellow Gryffindors and by unspoken agreement, retired to an unused corner. It was a small cubbyhole which was largely out of sight from the rest of the room, and typically used by couples seeking a relatively private location for their amorous liaisons. Harry and Fleur had never made use of it, not yet being that comfortable with their relationship, but of course they received a round of wolf whistles and gentle teasing from the rest of their friends once their destination was known. If either could have seen into the thoughts of the other, they would have seen a similar determination to have the long-overdue discussion about a certain Head Boy.

Situated comfortably in the small love seat in the cubbyhole, Harry sat and looked at his beautiful betrothed. Things had been going quite well between them, he decided, and fresh off her victory in the tournament, she looked more appealing than ever, though her hair was in disarray and her face still slightly flushed from her exertions. He was lucky to have someone like her, he decided, and it was not only because of her looks—she had an innate goodness and competence about her, not to mention a sweet personality which was especially appealing.

"Fleur—"

"I think we need—"

They spoke together, each stopping and smiling at the other when they realized they had spoken at the same time.

"You first, Harry," she said, reaching out to take his hand between her own.

"I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of you for winning the tournament," Harry told her with a smile and a squeeze of his hand. "I always knew you were a resourceful and powerful witch, and now everyone else does too."

Fleur ducked her head a little, but then looked him in the eye with some determination. "I am not concerned about what other people think of me, Harry. They can believe whatever they like."

"I know," Harry said with a shrug. "But I've heard lots of people say things like they didn't know how you were made a champion. That kind of stuff. But I always knew it wasn't true."

"It is fine, Harry. I have had to deal with attitudes like that since I was a girl. I am not offended."

"You don't need to be offended," Harry said with a grin. "I'll be offended for you."

Smiling at him, Fleur released his hand and leaned against him, while Harry lifted his arm and put it around her shoulders. They had never been this physically close, and Harry was finding he was enjoying the sensations their closeness engendered. Fleur was soft and curvy and very feminine. Oh yes, he was enjoying it very much.

"Thank you, Harry. But I believe we should speak about Roger—I am sure you have noticed a change in him lately."

"I have," Harry admitted, "and though I'd like to dispute it, I've got an idea that the twins were right."

"They were," Fleur confirmed. "I have told you before about my Yule date with Roger. I want you to know that I never saw anything more in him than as a date which I was required to have as a champion. After that night, I do not think I spoke more than two words to him for the rest of the year."

"You don't need to explain further," Harry assured her. "I don't believe anything he said. I trust you."

Seemingly buoyed by Harry's assertion, Fleur let out a sigh and burrowed in closer to him. "Thank you, Harry. But I still think I owe you an explanation."

Quietly, and without much fanfare, Fleur began to speak of the encounters she had had with Roger over the course of that year, focusing on the specifics of what had happened and what she had felt and how she had responded. She touched little on her opinion of Roger's possible motives—they had already agreed on what they believed his motives to be, after all, and neither considered further conversation on the subject to be necessary. It was in some ways worse than Harry had expected—especially their last confrontation



in the library—and less than he had feared. At least the Head Boy had not gone beyond verbal passes in his attempt to get Fleur to dally with him.

This could not continue, however. Roger was intruding upon Fleur's peace of mind with his efforts, and Harry was not about to stand aside and allow her to be imposed upon in such a manner.

When she had finished, Harry immediately asked her what she thought they should do about the situation. The answer was not surprising, considering her personality.

"Do not worry about me, Harry. I can handle myself."

"I know that, Fleur," Harry responded, pulling away to look her in the eyes. "But I won't allow him to continue to act like this. You don't deserve to be treated like this. You know he's just using your heritage to justify his behavior."

Sighing, Fleur leaned into Harry's side again. "I suspect as much. But I believe that his behavior will change after your duel with him. The fact that you beat him will make him stop. I am certain he is just a bully.

"And besides," Fleur continued with a small giggle, "did you see how Professor Dumbledore was watching him? I think the Head Boy is in trouble!" she finished in a sing song tone.

Chuckling, Harry hugged the French witch to his side, still thinking about the situation with Roger. A part of him—admittedly the Neanderthal intent on protecting his woman—wanted to hex Roger all the way to London and back. He wanted Roger to break out in a cold sweat every time he even thought of approaching Fleur again.

But he had to admit that Fleur was likely right. And even if she was not, there were still ways to handle the situation which did not involve confrontations and violence. He highly suspected that his friends were right and that the Headmaster took a very dim view of Roger's actions that evening. It was likely that Roger would back down now. Besides, Harry had already admitted to himself—that very night!—that he had developed a very undesirable character trait in the past few months. Did that not apply to this situation as well? Challenging the Head Boy, taunting him or trying to humiliate him—

these things were the mark of a bully, a label Fleur had just applied to Roger. Harry wanted to be better than that. He would be better than that, he decided.

"If you think we can leave it be, then I'm fine with that," he told her.

He could feel, rather than see, Fleur's responding smile, and indulged himself in a brief imagination of just how beautiful it appeared on her face.

"Thank you, Harry," Fleur responded. "Thank you for your trust and for your faith in me. Believe me—you have nothing to worry about from Roger."

"That's a relief," Harry said with a laugh. "I'd hate to think that you prefer a loud-mouthed braggart over me. Sorry, Fleur, but that's the way he's behaved lately."

"I know," Fleur admitted. "But to be honest, I am much more interested in our relationship, than in talking about Roger any more."

"Oh?"

"I have just been wondering... Well, actually I have been meaning..."

She trailed off and fell silent.

"Fleur?" he prompted, getting a sigh in response.

"This is all just so frustrating," said Fleur. "I've never been in this situation before and I don't really know what to do."

"Neither have I," Harry said. He was proud of how his voice was steady and clear, but inside butterflies had begun fluttering in his stomach at the suspicion that she wanted to talk about them. He was not good at this interpersonal stuff, and part of him wanted to run screaming, as it was obvious that Fleur wanted to discuss their relationship. Any hot-blooded male would flee at such a prospect! With his upbringing, Harry knew that he was not very good at speaking about such personal subjects.

Fleur pulled away from him and smiled. "Then I guess we will just have to figure it out together."

She stopped for a moment, thinking about what she wanted to say, before looking back up at him. She began hesitantly, "I was just concerned over the state of our relationship."

"Is it because of what Roger said?" Harry asked.

"Partly," Fleur admitted. But more than that, it is just that it is... moving so slowly. But I have never been in a relationship before and I do not know how quickly it is supposed to develop. I guess I just wonder what you think about me."

Abashed, Harry felt his cheeks begin to burn at her direct question. Never having been comfortable with relationships of any kind, he did not know precisely how to act, or how to respond. He was about to respond—how he was not certain, but likely with some stammered drivel which would make little sense—when he glanced up and was caught by Fleur's eyes. She had very pretty, light blue eyes with darker flecks around the irises, but it was the earnest determination in them that calmed Harry and made him realize that Fleur was being very open and serious about the conversation. He could do no less.

"I really like you, Fleur," he said, albeit somewhat hesitantly. "I've enjoyed getting to know you and I have come to feel that you are someone I can confide in. I've never had many friends I've felt particularly close to, but you're quickly moving to the top of the list.

"I'm also very attracted to you," Harry quickly admitted, before he could lose his nerve. "I'd have to be a zombie, not to be attracted to you. But it's much more than that. You're a wonderful person, Fleur, and I feel lucky that I have you in my life."

Apparently it was the right thing to say, as Fleur directed a brilliant smile at him, so beautiful that it almost took his breath away. "Thank you, Harry," was Fleur's quiet response. Then she winked at him. "You sure are a charmer, to be saying things like that to a girl."

Pleased that he had gotten it right, Harry grinned at her and squeezed her hand. "I think we're both lucky. I know we both

wondered if this betrothal contract was really a good idea. I think we've both seen that we can be very good together."

"We can," Fleur agreed. "But I have wondered if we are moving too slowly. We are to be married some day, after all. Should we not begin to behave like we will?"

Abashed, Harry still nodded with whatever composure he possessed. "I was just giving you space to get used to the betrothal. I didn't want to push you. I wasn't sure of your feelings."

"Oh Harry," Fleur said with an affectionate hug. "That is so like you. You do not need to worry about me—I will let you know if we go further than I am comfortable with."

Still bashful, Harry nodded his head in agreement. "So, you want to start acting a little more like a couple?"

"I think we should," said Fleur. "There are some benefits, you know." She laughed and favored him with an arch smile. "I assume you would find some of the normal activities of engaged couples to be pleasant. Would you not?"

Grinning, Harry waggled his eyebrows, relieved that he was beginning to feel confidence swell within him. "I'm sure they could not be anything but pleasant."

"In that case, I think we should seal it with a kiss," she said before she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

As a first kiss it was soft and sweet and very pleasant, and Harry could only agree that it was an excellent suggestion. Harry found himself responding immediately, and though they kept it chaste and did not venture into the territory Harry had sometimes heard Dudley bragging that he had done with his girlfriend, he still decided he liked kissing Fleur very much.

It did not last long, but Harry found himself strangely breathless when Fleur leaned back and regarded him. Harry was filled with elation. "That was very nice," he said, unknowingly beginning to babble. "I think you were right about our relationship and I—"

His words were stilled when Fleur, smiling softly, reached out and pressed her fingers against Harry's lips. "You talk too much, Harry. Kiss me again."

And so he did.

A/N:

1. Thanks to everyone who has stuck with this, and my apologies for the delay. There have been a lot of little niggling problems crop up in the past several weeks and they have sapped my energy, my writing time, and sent my muse on a holiday to the vast yonder. I think everything is pretty much back to normal.

2. You just never know how something is going to be received. I figured the last chapter would get a little more commentary than normal, but when all was said and done, it was the third most reviewed chapter so far, and the two ahead of it were followed by long hiatuses which allowed the reviews to pile up. I hope the duel with Roger and the subsequent happenings in the chapter were worth the wait.

3. I also hope everyone who was clamoring for a little Harry/Fleur interaction was satisfied. They are now officially on their way!

4. I wrote a passage into the chapter which is a homage to a passage in a book written by one of my favorite fantasy fiction authors. You know how sometimes certain lines and phrases in certain books just seem to stick with you? This was one such for me. It's not a direct quote, but should be noticeable if there is anyone who was as much a fantasy fiction geek as I was a couple of decades ago. Kudos to anyone who can spot the passage, guess the name of the author, and the name of the character who said it.

5. Finally, I just wanted to address some of Harry's introspection after Fleur and Hermione cautioned him for how he behaved to Malfoy. Let's face it - the git deserves it in spades. However, I've noticed that Harry has become a lot more cocky and arrogant during the story, and though I intended for him to become more confident, I never intended him to become unlikeable, which I think has been the case at certain times. (Several people mentioned his behavior after

the Quidditch match as an example, as well as a few other instances earlier in the story.)

However, I feel like it has been worth it to detour down this path a little for a few reasons. First, it shows him to be flawed, like any other character. Reading about a Gary Stu is not all that interesting, after all. Second, I think it shows him to be a little like his father, which was never shown in the series. James was a bit of a git until he was smartened up too - perhaps this is a glimpse of what Harry could have been like had he grown up with his parents. Finally, I like being able to show a character making progress, even if sometimes that progression can also be deemed to be somewhat of a regression. I feel that was very much the case in this facet of Harry's personality, and I hope that everyone reading can see the growth as well. That's not to say that he will never taunt Malfoy again...

6. Yeah, yeah, the chapter title is a little cheesy. I can only say that it seemed to fit.

## Chapter 26 – Potential Conflicts

Bearing bad news to the Dark Lord was sometimes a hazardous prospect. It was never a simple matter to determine just how displeased he would be and whether or not his displeasure would be manifest in a way which included physical punishment. Having said that, he was not known to punish indiscriminately, understanding that followers who were motivated by conviction were infinitely more useful and effective than those motivated by nothing more than base fear. And though he was not above using the Cruciatus to punish some underling who had failed, such punishments were only reserved for those who had done so egregiously. However, the mercurial nature of his moods created just enough uncertainty that one could never know exactly what form his displeasure would make itself known.

Often, the threat of violence and punishment was more effective than the actual committing of said violence. The sight of the Dark Lord seething in anger was an awesome sight, and many a follower had felt somehow reprieved when his famous anger remained physically unexpressed.

In addition to this the Dark Lord had a particular way of regarding those—particularly those of his inner circle—who had failed him. It was an expression which seemed to suggest that failure was an enormous imposition on the plans of a man who, after all, only desired to put the world back on its proper axis, and ensure that his followers received their due from the world. When this was added to his praise, which was often lavish, when his followers were successful, and he had a pretty powerful motivational tool to ensure compliance with his commands.

Unfortunately for one Lucius Malfoy, that exasperated and long-suffering expression had been directed at him more often than not since the Dark Lord's return, and all because of an ill-conceived plan which had backfired spectacularly and resulted in the destruction of an heirloom which the Dark Lord prized. To this day Lucius still did not know what had been so important about the diary, but the Dark Lord's displeasure upon learning of its destruction had earned him his first—and only—session to date under the agonies of the Cruciatus. Working his way back into the Dark Lord's graces had been arduous, but seemed to be bearing fruit.

But now he had to report another failure, and given his master's sometimes mercurial moods, Lucius was uncertain as to whether this was to be considered an significant failure or merely a minor inconvenience. And the failure was not even his own!

Stalking through the halls of the Death Eaters' base of operations, Lucius seethed at the continuing incompetence of his only son. Draco was a disappointment. In fact, he was such a disappointment, that Lucius had toyed with the idea of siring another heir, for certainly his current heir was nothing like he would have expected would result from the joining of his own august bloodline to that of the blacks—a family with a long history, steeped in Pureblood tradition. How such a failure could have occurred Lucius was not certain, but it had and to be truthful, he was not certain what to do about it.

In short, Draco was nothing like a true Slytherin should be. Draco was in fifth year now, and by Lucius's own fifth year, he had already been starting to take the reins of leadership in Slytherin house as scion of one of the most prestigious families in Britain. Draco... well, he was ambitious enough, but had very little talent or will to do anything to realize his ambitions. Instead of true Slytherin cunning, he had a disturbing tendency toward Gryffindor-like brashness, not to mention a rather overt confrontational style. And though he had plenty of loyalty towards his father and the Dark Lord, Draco did not know the meaning of hard work, or understand that it went hand in hand with ambition and cunning, all of which would allow one to realize their goals. And as for intelligence... No, Draco was anything but a mix of the houses—or at least he was not a mix of the good traits of the houses, and at this point, Lucius was uncertain that he was a worthy heir to the Malfoy name and legacy.

Shaking his head angrily, Lucius stopped and collected himself; it would not do to appear before the Dark Lord with anything other than a calm dispassionate demeanor. The Dark Lord had an almost supernatural ability to detect weakness, and Lucius had no desire to be set down once again when he was just beginning to regain favor with his master. The problem of Draco would have to wait.

The room into which Lucius entered had been dubbed "the throne room" by those denizens of the house, and though Lucius could not claim to know the mind of his master, the term was very apropos. It was long and spacious, with windows on the far wall to allow in the



natural light of the day. The chair in which the Dark Lord sat, which was itself situated on a low raised dais, was ornate and high-backed—and likely transfigured from something else. The room was empty when Lucius entered except for the Dark Lord, a circumstance which was highly in Lucius's favor. His fellow Death Eaters were also adept at sniffing out blood in the water, and Lucius had no desire to report his son's failure before an audience.

"Ah, Lucius, welcome," the Dark Lord greeted him as he approached the throne.

Lucius bowed with respect before returning the greeting, noting that his master appeared to be in an uncommonly good mood. That would undoubtedly be to his favor.

The Dark Lord, perceptive as he was, noticed Lucius's observation. "Plans are moving forward, my friend," he said with aplomb. "There are a few important things which need to be seen to in order to further our plans. But they shall be taken care of in due course."

Although Lucius knew that the Dark Lord had been preoccupied with Potter since the confrontation in the graveyard the previous spring, he knew better than to ask—the Dark Lord would favor him with the needs of the moment when the timing was appropriate. Everything else was irrelevant.

"I believe, however, that you did not come here to discuss our future plans," the Dark Lord continued. "I believe that today was the day that your son was to report back to you?"

"Indeed, you are correct, My Lord," Lucius responded with a bow. "Draco approached Potter yesterday after his group's meeting. Potter rebuffed him, apparently with the Headmaster's approval, saying that it was an invitation only club."

In truth, Lucius suspected that Potter had done more than rebuff Draco, and his son had suffered another humiliation at the hands of the Boy-Who-Lived, given the tone of his letter. Still, Draco's failure was uncertain enough that Lucius felt it better to stick to the facts, rather than wander off into conjecture. That and it would lessen Lucius's shame if his conjecture was true.

"Ah, so Potter did refuse young Draco entrance to his little club. Pity."

"I apologize for my son's failure, My Lord."

The Dark Lord just waved him off. "There was only a slight chance that the Potter brat would be shortsighted enough to actually allow it. The information on exactly what he is teaching his friends and some insight into how powerful the boy truly is would have been useful. It is, however, not essential."

This, more than anything, was what frustrated Lucius about being uncertain of his position with the Dark Lord. Before his fall and subsequent return, Lucius would have known that his master was not truly concerned about Draco's task. Now, however, he could not take the chance. It was good to know that this would not be held against him. In that, at least, he could be secure.

"Useful, perhaps, but not surely it does not matter," Lucius said instead, moving past the issue of Draco's failure. "Potter is only a boy, regardless of how he manages to cheat death. He can only put the inevitable off for so long. Surely his time will come."

"Ah, but you forget, Lucius," the Dark Lord rebuked him mildly. "On several occasions the boy has defied me and survived when he should have been defeated."

"And before you say that the first was his meddling mother's doing, you are likely correct. However, I cannot help but suppose that something about the boy himself aided in his salvation, whether it was his magic, or something else which sets him apart. It would be foolhardy to suggest that Potter is only a boy and is not special somehow—he most clearly is, and he will require delicate handling."

"Beyond that, nothing I have been able to find has allowed me to uncover how exactly he was able to survive my killing curse that night. Add to that the fact that the boy met me at wand point and was completely outclassed, and still managed to survive. Whatever it is that allows him to continue to defy me, I cannot lower my guard. He must die the next time we meet—there is no other outcome possible."

"Very well, My Lord. Is there anything else you would have my son do?"

"Nothing specific at this time," the Dark Lord said after some thought. "He should watch them whenever possible and report back whatever he is to discuss of their strengths and weaknesses, including anything he is able to determine of the club's curriculum."

"And the house traitors who are involved in Potter's circle?" Lucius asked. "Should he attempt to... remind them where their true loyalties should lie?"

"Again, there is little point in it now. Though we cannot allow members of my house to fraternize in such a manner with Potter indefinitely, now is not the time to make noise. Let them become complaisant for now. Of course, that does not mean he should not begin asserting his authority over the entire house, much as both you and I did when we attended Hogwarts."

Lucius could not completely suppress the grimace at the Dark Lord's words. He had been relieved at first, as he doubted Draco had the talent and ability to truly bring the blood traitor Slytherins under control. Undoubtedly, he was equally incapable of taking a leadership role in Slytherin, for that matter, and that lack would become painfully apparent if he was directed to attempt to do so.

Unfortunately, his reaction was not missed by his perceptive master.

"I understand that you have some... reservations about your son, my friend."

"I confess that I do," replied Lucius. "He is nothing that I would have expected in a son of mine, and shows an almost distressing incapability toward anything resembling cunning."

"Perhaps," the Dark Lord said, "but he also displays a proper attitude and a fervent loyalty to our beliefs. His energies need a little direction, but I believe that he will be acceptable if that direction is provided. Bring him before me when he returns for winter break and between us we will attempt to educate him better."

A wave of his hand indicated to Lucius that their conversation was at an end, so he bowed and retreated from the room. A letter would

need to be written to Draco, and he had other tasks with which he was assigned. It was good, he reflected, to have the master back. Those years in the wilderness without him had seemed to empty and purposeless. It was good to finally be directing their energies toward a common goal. The Wizarding world would soon be theirs for the taking.

Though the days after the club's tournament were quiet, the behavior of Roger Davies, Head Boy and newly christened nemesis to one Harry Potter, was notable in the lack of any of his previous animosity toward Harry. Though nothing was ever said within the hearing of any of the students, Harry and his friends were almost certain that their speculation about the intentions of the Headmaster and Davies's head of house had been true. His generally subdued manner and intense avoidance of the group suggested that the meeting had resulted in his being reminded quite pointedly of the position he held and the fact that his overtly hostile behavior toward any student would not be tolerated. Though Harry passed him in the halls several times, Roger did not deign to acknowledge him, keeping his gaze resolutely away. In fact, though Roger was in many classes with Fleur, and even sat close to her in a couple, he was as studious in avoiding her as he was Harry.

This shunning, of course, was not at all unwelcome to the pair in question—in fact, they felt rather cheerful in his lack of his focus on them, something they had desired all along. Furthermore, when he failed to show up at the Defense Club the next week, they heaved their last sigh of relief, as they had discussed removing his name from the list of club members should he attempt to attend again. His absence rendered their intentions unnecessary, a fact with which they were gratified, as the removal of the Head Boy from the club could carry some political ramifications within the school.

What they did not anticipate was the increased attendance at the next club meeting—which included even a couple of Slytherins among their number. It appeared that the events of the tournament had made the gossip rounds of the school, and suddenly many were eager to be included in what would undoubtedly be a great benefit of added study, especially since the first three months of the school year had been essentially wasted by their erstwhile Defense Professor.

Harry, along with Hermione and Fleur, were careful in vetting every student who requested admission—particularly the Slytherins, though they were assisted by Daphne and Tracey—but in the end accepted all applicants. The new members brought their overall numbers to greater than fifty, and included a larger portion of upper years from other houses who, up to that point, had remained skeptical of the club and had not been persuaded to join.

In direct contrast to the first months of the school year, Defense once again had become a class to anticipate rather than dread. Whatever could be said of Dumbledore, the man was a consummate teacher, who was comfortable in a classroom and showed a certain flair for explaining the lessons, guiding the students, or simply ruminating upon some obscure or theoretical idea. It was a revelation for the entire school, none of whom had ever seen him in a classroom, and also served to make him more... human, in a way, and certainly much more approachable than he had ever been before. The students in the school had largely grown up with accounts of the man's exploits, particularly those related to Gellert Grindelwald. They were familiar with the Headmaster, the defeater of the previous Dark Lord, and the man of many names and titles, and as such, the revelation that he could teach and teach well was a revelation to some, regardless of the fact that he had always attempted to be available to all students.

As for the other classes, well they continued apace, for the most part as they had all year. The excitement was building for winter break and the Yule Ball, and though that was sapping some of the students' attention away from their studying, life at the school seemed to continue much as it had.

Finally, with respect to the group of friends, Harry and Fleur's discussion and subsequent amorous activities—or as amorous as they had gotten to that point—had cemented on both their minds that they were making progress with one another, after little progress had been seen before. They both felt more comfortable and at ease with each other, and each, in their own minds, was well on the way to considering the other in a more intimate manner.

This, of course, led to more overt shows of affection, especially in their propensity to hold hands whenever they walked through the halls, and what had become a ritual for them to kiss each other goodbye when the time came for them to part.

Their greater comfort and affection with each other went largely unmentioned upon by their friends, though it certainly did not go unnoticed. A little gentle ribbing, of course, was the order of the day and unsurprisingly, it was the Weasley twins who were the most overt in their teasing. They took to staring at Fleur in mock dreamy expressions whenever the two were present, which they claimed was what Harry looked like whenever he looked at the beautiful French witch. Harry, by contrast, was content to be somewhat smug at the fact that Fleur was on his arm, to the envy of just about every boy in the school. This did nothing to silence the teasing, but it did allow Harry to respond in kind.

Daphne Greengrass was well aware of the effect she had on boys. With her slender figure, blue eyes and long flowing black locks, she was the epitome of a beautiful young girl just stepping over the threshold into the realm of young women. Even her average height was a benefit as she was not too short, and not so tall that she towered over others—boys by and large, she had noticed, seemed a little skittish around girls who were taller than they were. She had always known that she was blessed with good looks, but if seeing her own countenance in the mirror was not enough to inform her of her good looks, then the glances she often received from the young men around her would have made the fact unmistakable. Of course, this was a blessing as well as a curse, as she attracted the attention of those she would otherwise prefer to have avoided. In particular, Malfoy had been after her for most of the past year to "dispense of her favors" as any good young woman should when confronted by the interest of such an impressive specimen of Pureblood virility. The fact that he was all but betrothed to the sycophantic Pansy Parkinson apparently did not figure into Draco's calculation of what he considered to be proper behavior.

Unfortunately for Malfoy, Daphne's parents had always taught her that she deserved as much respect as a Malfoy or anyone else, and she did not believe that spending time as his plaything was in any way respectable. This did not even take into account the fact that regardless of his blond hair and generally pleasant countenance, she found his sense of entitlement irksome and his attitude disgusting. Malfoy, when she took into account everything about him, was repulsive and Daphne could not imagine herself favoring him with anything other than her contempt.

Luckily for her, he was also completely ineffectual, with a much higher opinion of his abilities than he had any right, which was something of a blessing. A truly competent Malfoy with his attitude and bloated sense of his own worth would be a truly dangerous phenomenon. She had repeatedly informed him of her lack of interest, and though she had to admit that he was remarkably persistent, he lacked the skills to truly affect her, regardless of his bluster.

A particular illustration of this state of affairs played out the Friday after the tournament. It was late and Daphne, having spent most of the evening in the library researching for a Charms assignment, was on her way back to the Slytherin common room before curfew. She had just entered the corridor in the dungeons which led to her destination when Malfoy, accompanied by Parkinson—his favorite puppy—stepped from a side corridor and confronted her.

"Well look if it isn't Greengrass out after curfew," Parkinson sneered in her usual manner.

Daphne rolled her eyes. Snape could not have picked two more useless prefects had he tried. "I still have ten minutes, in case you're having trouble telling time."

Pansy sneered and appeared ready to retort when Draco interrupted her. "Shut up, Pansy," he commanded. "I need to speak with Daphne alone for a moment. Wait for me at the end of the hall."

Clearly he expected to be obeyed, as he completely ignored Pansy, focusing his attention on Daphne instead. Parkinson, presumably used to such rude behavior from Draco, directed a glare at him before thrusting her nose in the air and stalking off in a snit. For Daphne, the fact that he had called her by her given name was an indication that he was about to favor her with his attentions once again. She suppressed a sigh, knowing that it would make this interview even worse should she show any of her exasperation.

It was, therefore, something of a surprise when he did not immediately launch into his normal spiel of how she should show her proper respect for her betters, and direct her attention at him personally. Instead, he regarded her in silent contemplation, much more thoughtfully than he had ever done before, especially with his

impetuous nature. It concerned her, if she were to be honest with herself.

"I'm rather disappointed in you, Daphne," Malfoy finally said without preamble.

Allowing herself nothing more than an arched eyebrow, Daphne merely stared at him.

"You've never shown the proper respect for your superiors," Malfoy continued, "but you've always at least associated with those worthy of your own stature. In the past few weeks, however, you've started to show some definite blood traitor tendencies."

"Perhaps I already had them and just never showed them," replied Daphne with some impudence.

Malfoy appeared to consider that for several moments. "Well, you do hang around with Davis a lot." Tracey was a Halfblood—one of the few in Slytherin house. For those who cared about such things—which was not the entirety of the house, contrary to popular belief—she was only accepted because her father had also been a Slytherin and was a member of society of some wealth and influence, regardless of the fact he had married a Muggleborn. Should Tracey's younger brother also be sorted into Slytherin, and he would start Hogwarts next year, he would be accepted on the same basis, though as the heir, he would undoubtedly have a leg up on Tracey.

But Malfoy had continued to speak on over Daphne's ruminations. "Still, she's acceptable to a certain extent I suppose, regardless of her mother." He spat the last word with some vitriolic contempt. "But you've kept your associations to those within the house for the most part, and even when you've spoken to those outside the house, at least you've kept it to those who come from acceptable backgrounds, for all that some of them are blood traitors."

"Malfoy," Daphne interrupted what was rapidly becoming a rant, "I don't exactly need your permission become friends with anyone. It's not like I've ever listened to anything you had to say before."

"Maybe not," said Malfoy, "though we still need to discuss that shameful behavior at some point."



At this, Daphne did roll her eyes, not caring if the little prick noticed it or not. "My 'shameful behavior' as you put it is none of your concern."

"Look Greengrass," he said, his change to her surname a sure sign that he was becoming frustrated with her, "I just want to point out that things are different now. Hanging around with Bones and Davis might be acceptable, but throwing your lot in with Potter is sure to come back to haunt you. I'd think twice before continuing to hang around with him and his crew."

"And what if I'm getting close to him for my own purposes?" Daphne asked. "We are the house of the cunning and ambitious, you know."

"We are," Draco agreed, his face assuming a mask of false pleasantry. "But there are some others who would be much better to 'get close to'."

"Like she'd want to get closer to pond scum like you," another voice rang out through the hallway.

Daphne smiled as Tracey approached them, her eyes fixed on Malfoy. He, in turn, had turned his displeased gaze on her, though it was clear that Tracey was not fazed by it in the slightest. The animosity between Tracey and Malfoy was almost legendary in Slytherin house. Tracey considered him a pampered prince, and an ineffectual dolt continually clinging to his father's coattails, an opinion which was certainly not grounded in anything other than the truth. For his part, Malfoy thought Tracey to be an upstart mongrel, only grudgingly accepted due to her father's wealth. The fact that Tracey was considered to be quite plain and took no thought to her appearance—though Daphne was aware that Tracey cleaned up rather well, when she took the trouble to do so—did not help engender positive feelings in one so image obsessed as Malfoy.

"Of course," Tracey continued, pouring fuel onto the fire; she loved to rile Malfoy up, "our esteemed housemate wouldn't know cunning if it walked up and punched him in the nose."

"No one asked for your opinion, Davis," Malfoy snarled.

"I'm well aware of that," responded Tracey airily. "You ought to know by now that I'm not concerned about waiting to be asked for my opinion."

"You'll be shown your place." With that, Malfoy pointed ignored Tracey and turned his attention back to Daphne. "This is what you get when you hang around with the wrong sort, Daphne. It's been overlooked in the past, but times are changing. You had better start thinking about that."

"Look, Malfoy, we're all aware that you're really talking about that idiot whose arse your father is always kissing. In case you weren't aware, the Greengrasses remained neutral in the last war, and I expect we will continue to do so."

Though he flushed with anger at the derogatory comments toward the Dark Lord, Malfoy kept his temper. "Your hanging with Potter seems to be changing that stance."

"Who I am friends with does not affect the political policies of my family," Daphne retorted. "My father is head of house and he will continue to make the decisions for my family. I have joined Potter's group for my own reasons. My father is aware of my actions and is unconcerned by them."

Malfoy sidled closer to her and spoke in an earnest manner. "There will come a time when neutrality will no longer be tolerated. Regardless of what your father chooses to do, you can be insulated if you take the proper stance now. It wouldn't hurt to be seen on the arm of a Pureblood of good standing either."

With that statement, Malfoy's eye raked across her form with a lascivious leer, causing Daphne to experience a slight shudder. As always his gaze caused Daphne to feel the need to bathe, as she could almost feel the grime that the boy's expression produced.

"A Pureblood of good standing," repeated Tracey with a derisive snort. "You know, Malfoy, you have all the subtlety of rutting she dragon."

"Methinks Mr. Malfoy here is a lot more Gryffindor than Slytherin," Daphne responded with a sly smirk.

His countenance reddening with anger, Malfoy appeared ready to retort when Daphne decided to cut him off and end the confrontation. "Why don't you just bugger off, Malfoy?" she sneered. "You haven't intimidated me in all the time we've been here, and even if either of us weren't able to take you out before. Now that Potter is teaching us, you're just a gnat buzzing around and annoying us."

"Besides," Tracey continued, "it's clear that you barely know one end of your wand from the other. So unless you want your glorious Pureblood image to take a beating, I suggest you leave us alone."

"You'll pay for this," Malfoy growled. "Both of you."

"Well, I think we'll just take our chances," Daphne said negligently. "But you're welcome to try any time you like."

For a brief moment, Daphne thought that he would lose his composure, but whatever was holding him back, he appeared to gain control over himself quickly.

"It seems like we will not receive our chastisement today," said Tracey, evidently seeing what Daphne had seen. "Shall we?"

Daphne motioned to her friend to precede her, and the two left a red-faced Malfoy behind without a second glance. They walked down the corridor toward the common room and, seeing Parkinson skulking near the entrance, Daphne decided to get in one final dig.

"You'd better go and see your boyfriend, Parkinson," she said with a smirk. "He's having a bad day. And for that matter, you may want to give him some loving—I think he's starting to stray."

Pansy threw them a dark look before she hurried off down the hallway in search of her paramour. Tracey sniggered, ensuring, of course, that the rapidly retreating girl heard her, before shaking her head and turning away.

The common room was quite busy, as was typical for a Friday night, with pockets of students sitting in groups chatting, playing games, or even a few who were studying, though that group consisted primarily of upper year students for whom NEWTs were looming large. The two, by unspoken agreement, made their way through the common room and towards the stairs which led to the dormitories—they both

found the common room a trifle depressing, with its dark, almost gothic décor, and the unrelieved darkness, not to mention the company which was often present. The dorms were not a lot better, but at least they were private for the most part, and could be brightened by their own choices of decorations.

The girls' dorms were open and spacious, with curtains separating each girl's bed and private space. It was to Daphne's area of the room they retired, after confirming that no one else was present—Pansy was obviously off with Malfoy, while Bulstrode was nowhere in evidence. Hopefully, they would remain undisturbed for some time.

"So, I only caught a little of what Malfoy was saying," said Tracey, her bluntness refreshing after Malfoy's clever—or what he considered clever—innuendos. "It didn't sound like his usual speech."

"It was different," Daphne replied, frowning. "That bit about being seen on a Pureblood's arm was the first time he raised the subject."

"That's different."

"And troublesome. Most of the time he's pretty transparent. What could he be up to?"

"Oh come on, Daphne, use your head," exclaimed Tracey. "Ten days ago he all but demands to be included in the club, and walks off in a snit when Harry told him to bugger off. Yesterday, I heard that he was giving Zabini grief about the club, and today he accosts you about it and hardly even puts any effort into trying to get into your knickers. Seems pretty plain to me what he's up to."

Daphne frowned. "You think he's trying to make trouble for us? On daddy's orders?"

"Though I obviously can't say for sure, I know for a fact that Malfoy doesn't wipe his arse without daddy's permission. I figure he was ordered to try to get into the club—though really they were stupid to go about it the way they did. Or maybe that's just Malfoy's stupidity fouling things up—I don't know. But now, after he's been refused, he's blathering about associating with the wrong sort to the Slytherin club members."

"I think you may be right," Daphne said, thinking about what Tracey had said. They had discussed briefly Malfoy's attempt to get Harry to allow him to enter the club, but at the time they had both brushed it off as his standard stupidity and not worth further thought. His behavior since then, however, while not overt, was still troublesome.

It was nothing less than they had expected, though, Daphne mused. For someone of his ilk, any fraternizing with Potter or any Gryffindors would be seen as a betrayal. With Malfoy's imagined stature in his own house, he would clearly see it as his duty to bring the traitors under his thumb. The fact that most of the rest of the house had basically ignored their membership in the club—and the fact that they had actually gained a couple more members!—rendered Malfoy's opinions largely irrelevant. If anyone other than Malfoy had cared about what they were doing, they may have had a real problem.

"So what do you think we should do?" Tracey asked.

"Tell Harry about it, and ignore the little ponce," Daphne responded with an offhand shrug. "Harry will likely want to pull his liver out through his nose, and we'll have to reassure him that we aren't afraid of Malfoy."

"Damn it!" Tracey exclaimed, with a certain gleeful gleam in her eyes. "Watching Malfoy's liver emerge through his nostril would be so entertaining. Don't you think we could let Harry do it? Even just a little?"

Laughing, Daphne shook her head. "How do you pull someone's liver out through their nose 'just a little'?"

"I'm sure Harry could find a way," was Tracey's response, which caused Daphne to laugh even harder. Tracey was blunt and forthright, and had a rather wicked sense of humor, which were all things that Daphne liked about her.

"Malfoy was right about one thing," Tracey continued in a much more serious tone of voice. "The days of being safely neutral might be over."

"I know," responded Daphne quietly.

"Have you heard anything more from your family?"

Shaking her head, Daphne responded, "Not since the last letter from my mother. You?"

"They won't bother," Tracey scoffed. "They know that dad won't give them the time of day, considering what they think about mum. That doesn't mean that we won't be a target, though."

Daphne nodded glumly. Malfoy had not had the wit to see it, but one of Daphne's reasons for aligning herself with Potter was that she hoped that she would be able to gain some form of protection for her family by her association with him. On the surface, her family would still maintain the neutrality which had protected them in the first war with the Death Eaters, but in reality, this was the first step in the Greengrasses joining the side of the light. Of course Harry was still too young to offer them his personal protection, but he rubbed shoulders with the likes of Dumbledore, Sirius Black, who she was certain would become a force in their world, and the Delacours. None of those names were to be taken lightly.

Tracey's reasons were similar, though her family's situation was a drastically different due to her mother being a Muggleborn. At least in the Death Eaters' eyes, the Greengrasses were suitably Pureblood. That would give them a reprieve, something which Tracey's family did not necessarily have.

"And what if Harry finds out that we've not been completely upfront with him?" Tracey asked.

"I can't believe that he'd tell us to get lost," Daphne responded. "Besides, we haven't been untruthful with him—we just haven't told him everything. As Slytherins, we're allowed to conceal things. The whole 'house of the cunning' thing, remember?"

Tracey laughed. "That's such a useful out!"

"It is!" Daphne said with a grin. "But maybe I should tie myself to him a little tighter," she continued. "I'm sure I could get my dad to propose a marriage contract with him if I asked him to."

"I think you will have to wait in line," was Tracy's dry response. "If anyone's got the inside track into being the second Mrs. Potter, it would be Granger."

"He's the last of his line," Daphne answered, a trifle defensively. "He could have three wives as easily as he could two. And beside which—I like him. I think that once he was trained properly, he'd make a rather good husband, even if I was only one of three."

Tracey turned a serious gaze on Daphne, and reached out to take her hands, speaking with some concern. "Daphne, you should be really sure about this before you take such a step. Yes, Harry seems to be a good person, but you don't really know him. We've only hung around with him for a couple of weeks. Don't rush into anything."

Smiling, Daphne moved to reassure her friend. "I'm not really serious, Tracey. I do like him and I know I might have a shot, but things are a bit too early at this stage to consider that kind of move."

"But you have to admit the political advantages are enormous. I'd gain full protection for my family if I had an alliance with Potter through a betrothal. And he'd be gaining access to my family's resources and connections."

"True, but you're my friend and I'd prefer that you didn't sacrifice yourself when you may not need to do so. Give it some time and consider the implications before you commit."

By unspoken agreement they moved on to other discussion topics until Tracey announced her intention to go to bed much later that evening. Lying in her bed after her friend had gone to her own, Daphne considered the situation and Tracey's words. Her friend was right, Daphne knew, but a part of her could not help but imagine the thought of being on Harry's arm. He was a good person—she knew that instinctively—and she knew that it would be very easy to allow herself to fancy him. His growth spurt he appeared to have had in the past few months had also helped, allowing him to fill out a little from the scrawny boy he had been when he had arrived at Hogwarts. And more than any of these factors, Daphne was certain that Harry had a big enough heart for both of them, and more, if things went in that direction.

Daphne also knew that though nothing had been said in any of the letters she had exchanged with her family since she had joined the club, her parents would not have missed the possibility of having their eldest betrothed to Potter. It was something they would almost certainly be discussing once she returned home during the holidays.

But despite all this, there were two things in particular holding Daphne back—a blond and a brunette. Fleur was already his betrothed, and the woman was absolutely gorgeous—though she knew that Harry was not completely shallow, it was also evident that the blond would have no trouble at all keeping him interested. And whereas the relationship between the two had seemed to be stuck in neutral for the first few months of the school year, it appeared to have blossomed in the past few weeks, lending credence to the theory that they were quickly becoming used to one another, and that their affection for each other was growing.

And as for Hermione, well she was one of his first friends in the Wizarding world—or one of his first friends at all, if the rumors Daphne had heard were at all correct—and Daphne suspected that their relationship was profound. She could have Harry in her thrall with little effort, if only she would give herself the trouble.

Where did that leave Daphne? She knew she was attractive, though not on the same level as Fleur, and she knew that she was pleasant and intelligent company, though she did not have the emotional attachment which Hermione possessed. That did not necessarily mean that the attachment could not be forged, but it did leave her at a distinct disadvantage in the near future.

And what of Ginevra Weasley? Daphne considered herself very good at reading others, and she knew that Ginny had her sights set on Harry, regardless of the existence of any other girl. Even Ginny had a greater familiarity with Harry.

Daphne knew Harry had a big heart, but contending with so many factors was more than a little daunting prospect, and one Daphne was not certain she wished to undertake. The possibility for heartbreak appeared to be high unless she were to attempt to attach herself to him as nothing more than a business merger. But she wanted more from life and marriage than that.



Sighing, Daphne rolled over and, after bunching up her pillow, determined to allow herself to fall asleep. The situation with Harry would work itself out and Daphne knew that Tracey's advice about not rushing into anything was good. She would just have to get to know him better. Then she would know how to act.

Harry's reaction to Malfoy's actions was not far off from what Daphne and Tracey had predicted it to be. The little twit had done his best to make life miserable for Harry since he had arrived at Hogwarts and frankly, Harry had just about had enough of it.

But now he was harassing Harry's friends, and making things difficult for them, and for a young boy who had grown up with no friends due to the efforts of his cousin, he had learned the benefits of having friends and was determined to protect them. Upon hearing Tracey and Daphne's story, his first inclination had been to hunt the prick down and use his head for target practice.

It did not help that their disclosures had been made after the conclusion of the last club meeting before winter break, and rather than teach anything new, Harry had contented himself with reviewing what they had already done and admonished the club to keep up their practice over the holidays. As a result, he was feeling quite energetic and restless. He found that he was quite eager to repeat the lesson that Malfoy just never seemed to learn.

Fortunately—for a certain blond ponce, perhaps—the two Slytherin girls who he was rapidly coming to consider friends, assured him that they had no need of his protection.

"Harry, why have you been teaching us?" Tracey asked bluntly, neatly cutting off a head of steam which Harry was beginning to accumulate.

Blinking his eyes, Harry looked at the brunette Slytherin who had cut him off, desperately trying to come up with an answer. Unfortunately, he had been so focused on Malfoy and his impending humbling, that it was taking him a moment to reengage his brain.

"He's teaching you to defend yourselves," interjected Hermione, taking pity on Harry and answering in his stead.

"What does that have to do with hexing Malfoy to Hogsmeade and back?" asked Ron who was standing nearby and listening intently to the conversation. Trust Ron to back him up, Harry thought—Ron was perhaps the only one who disliked Malfoy more than Harry did himself.

"It's rather obvious, brother of ours," one of the twins piped up.

"Since Harry is teaching them to defend themselves," continued the other, "they need to use those skills and defend themselves against Malfoy."

"Exactly," said Daphne. "Otherwise, he'll never respect us. We'd just be targets when Harry isn't around if he's constantly leaping in to defend us."

"Like the idiot has ever learned a lesson anyway," Harry grumbled.

"True," answered Daphne. "But I think the lesson, even if it is not absorbed, is likely to mean more from us than it would from you. Besides, Malfoy already knows that you can kick his butt!"

"Not like that's ever stopped him," Harry muttered.

"Another thing you need to consider," said Tracey, "is that any of us was more than a match for him before we joined the club. Now that we've been attending for a while, he'd be even more overmatched. Trust us, Harry—we can handle ourselves when it comes to Malfoy."

Though he complained a little more, Harry grudgingly admitted that they were right. The git would still bear watching though—Harry would not put it past him to attempt to ambush his friends in some manner. If he tried that tactic, Harry would be all too happy to ensure he required the attention of Poppy Pomphrey.

"There, Tracey, I told you he could be reasonable," Daphne said in a sly tone.

"I'm not the one who said he'd want to remove Malfoy's liver."

"Through his nose, Tracey," was Daphne's lighthearted reply. "You have to remember that part. And after all, you were the one who said he might be able to do it 'just a little'."

A gleam in his eye, Harry interjected, "You know, that is worth considering..."

"All right, that's enough," Fleur interrupted, but though she attempted to affect a frown, Harry could easily see the mirth in her eyes. "If you teach the jerk a lesson the professors will almost certainly be obliged to put you in detention, even if they don't like the creep any more than you do. You'll just have to hold your temper."

"Yes dear," said Harry with a smirk, allowing himself to be led toward the exit.

"You are so henpecked," said Ron with a snigger.

"Maybe I am," was Harry's good-natured response, "but you wish you were."

As they departed, Harry was amused to see the contemplative expression on Ron's face, and he did not miss the redhead's last words.

"I don't know about that, but it does appear to have its advantages."

Among the disadvantages to having a betrothed, however—not to mention, it appeared, to being part of the Wizarding world—was the necessity of being known to society, and as Harry's family had generally been prominent for many years, his engagement to Fleur was a general topic of discussion. Add to that his elevated status as Boy-Who-Lived and the mystique of Fleur being Veela—who were almost unknown in Britain—and the curious bordered sometimes on the intrusive. Though Dumbledore had ensured him that his mail was being screened by the castle's house elves, Harry understood that his mail sometimes numbered in the hundreds, from simple well-wishing cards, to requests to meet, to proposals of business, as though a teen of fifteen had anything to do with business.

The day after the club meeting, a letter arrived which put all this into focus for Harry, and he did not really like where it was headed. It was a letter from Fleur's father, suggesting—though perhaps it was a little stronger than a mere suggestion—that they hold a ball on New Year's Eve, so that Harry and Fleur could be introduced to British Magical society as a couple. Needless to say Harry, as a

young teen, and already having a ball to attend before he left Hogwarts, was not exactly enthralled with the idea.

"Another ball?" he demanded, once he had read the offending letter. "Why would we need to go to another ball?"

To his side, Fleur sighed. "Harry, magical society is not precisely..."

"Modern?" Hermione piped up.

"Exactly," Fleur responded with a smile at Hermione. "British society is stuck in the... I believe you would call it Regency period, or maybe even the Victorian."

"Well, it depends what you mean," Hermione interrupted, her voice taking on her familiar lecturing tone. "The official Regency Period started in 1811 when George IV decided that his father, George III, was unfit to rule. He ruled as Prince Regent in his father's stead until George III died in 1820, and from that time forward as the actual king. However, the term Regency Era, often refers to a longer period, from the late 1700s, until George IV's brother William—who was king after George IV—died in 1837, and Queen Victoria's reign began, which, of course, was the start of the Victorian era."

Glazed eyes and perplexed looks appeared the order of the day after Hermione's long-winded explanation wound down and Hermione, suddenly realized that she had fallen into old habits and lectured them all, went crimson with embarrassment.

"I liked Jane Austen as a girl, and researched that stuff so I could better understand her books," she mumbled.

Harry, who was sitting beside her, pulled her into a one-armed hug, and affectionately kissed her cheek. "Don't ever change, Hermione," he said, amused to see her suddenly shift into a bashful state.

The rest of the group were all smirking at her, and Hermione, noticing this, rolled her eyes and once again became businesslike. "The Magical world is more Regency than Victorian, from what I've seen," said Hermione. "Though it's a little different from that too. Makes sense, I suppose, considering the Magical world had been separated from the Muggle world for several centuries before. The Magical world does not have the same level of societal rules or the

concept of propriety which existed at the time of the Regency era, but the attitudes seem similar to a degree."

"I get it," said Harry. "We are a couple hundred years behind Muggle society. What of it?"

"Part of rules of society back then was the idea of being known to society, or being introduced," Hermione continued the explanation. "It was regarded as a necessary rite of passage into adulthood. If you were not 'out', or introduced to the world at large, you could not participate in society. This is similar, I would guess, as it will introduce you not only as future head of House Potter, but also Fleur as your future lady. In many respects this introduction to society was very important to the future of the person, or couple, as the impression they created was remembered."

"And as a member of a family which has been influential for many years, this will set the tone for your future dealings with the elite of British society," continued Fleur. "France is the same in many respects, and the Magical world in general is many years behind the Muggle, partially due to the very conservative ideologies which pervade the magical world, but also because Magicals are longer lived than Muggles. A person has longer to remember the way things were when they were young, and this coupled with the conservative mindset makes us much more resistant to change."

"What of Muggleborns?" Harry demanded. "They come from a completely different world."

"True," said Fleur, "but Muggleborns are also not highly regarded in most parts of the world, though Britain is certainly at the extreme end of the spectrum. Purebloods as a rule do not trust Muggleborns and their new and radical ideas, and as they essentially rule the Magical world, newcomers either must fit in, or live in the Muggle world."

"They're right, Harry," chimed in Ron who had been listening to the discussion. "You know my family is not well off. But even so, we are considered higher on the societal scale than a Muggleborn family, as we are Pureblood. Still, even though I am higher on the social scale than a Muggleborn, I don't belong to the same social strata as the Potters and unless we kept our friendship after Hogwarts, we

wouldn't rub shoulders socially with you because of the differences in our wealth."

Hermione, it appeared, was outraged. "So as a Muggleborn, I won't have the same opportunities as Purebloods?"

"That's not completely true," said Ron. "There are many Muggleborn successes. They are always looked on with a certain measure of disdain, due to their origins. But you already knew this."

"I did," said Hermione as she bit her lip in thought. "But I always thought that there was the opportunity for advancement if I was willing to learn and work hard."

"There is," said Fleur. "But there will always be that divide, and some among the Purebloods will never accept you because of your origins."

"Then that would be like the land owners versus the merchant class in regency times," said Hermione slowly, apparently in deep thought. "Gentlemen farmers were considered part of the higher class while merchants, even if they were very rich, were looked down upon due to the origins of their wealth. Even if they purchased their own estates and became landed, merchants faced a long road before they were truly welcomed. A merchant could anticipate his descendents finally being accepted without the stain of being 'new money', but not until four or five generations had passed."

"That's a good analogy," said Fleur. "But even within the gentlemen class, there were differences which are analogous to Magical society today. The Weasleys, for example, are considered to be among the humblest of the Pureblood class, which would put them on the level of small estate holding gentlemen of the Regency era. Technically, they are socially even with their richer counterparts, but in reality, a wide gulf divides them. Harry, with his background and family, would be on the wealthy end of the spectrum, analogous to the wealthy of the gentleman class, or perhaps even to the level of minor nobility. To a certain extent, it's wealth that matters, as well as pedigree."

"So the Weasleys are the Bennets, while the Potters are like the Darcys?" asked Hermione.

"Exactly," said Fleur with a grin. She then winked at Hermione's incredulous expression and said, "I enjoyed Jane Austen as a girl, too. Not all old Magical families disdain Muggle culture and literature, you know."

"What of women?" asked Harry. "In the Muggle world it's only been in the past seventy years or so that women have begun to close the equality gap with men."

"In that subject, the Magical world has always been ahead of their Muggle counterparts," said Fleur.

"It probably has to do with the fact that a woman can hex your bits off if you suggest that she's inferior," joked Ron.

"Actually, that's part of it," agreed Fleur. "As far as anyone has ever been able to determine, there is no correlation between gender and magical ability. Add to that the fact that for many hundreds of years witches were the more visible of magical practitioners, and for many years were the main potions brewers, makers of certain charms, among other things. It has made for relative equality between the sexes."

It made sense from a certain point of view, Harry supposed. And he was not truly opposed to the idea of a ball—in fact the idea of being close to Fleur for an evening was quite appealing, the closer they became. It was just the thought of being on display, as he thought of it, which did not appeal to him.

"So what you're telling me, in a roundabout way, is that I don't really have a choice then."

"Oh, come on, Harry," said Fleur with a smile. "You always have a choice. But surely a night of dancing with me is not too much of a punishment."

Harry smiled and looked at her with some affection. "I'm sure I'll manage somehow."

A/N:

1. Sorry for the delay. I won't go into it here, but if anyone is really interested in the reason why, there is a short explanation on my

profile. The next chapter is the Yule Ball, and after that, we move on to the holidays and such. Then things begin to pick up a bit.

2. Some of you might know that I write some Jane Austen, which was, of course, the inspiration for the bit comparing the Regency period to the Magical world. It just seemed to make sense the more I thought about it, in addition to the fact that the Regency period was about 200 years before the HP takes place, and it's generally accepted that the Magical world is about that many years behind the Muggle (though I think that's fanon, rather than canon). Don't worry; this won't become a P&P/HP crossover! The similarities are not extremely important—nor are they direct analogies—they are more just a frame of reference.



## Chapter 27 – A Better Ball

The Saturday before the end of term was the final Hogsmeade weekend of the year. Perhaps more importantly, it was the final opportunity for the students to purchase a few items which always seemed to be required to make the best impression on others at a social event as important as the Yule Ball. Or, to be more precise, the female members of Hogwarts' student population needed to purchase a few final items. To the male students, such things were a matter of supreme indifference, though only the densest of them would have said such a thing within hearing of any young lady.

Harry and his friends had gone together to the village and the hustle and bustle of High Street was beyond what would generally be seen most weekends where the students were allowed to go. In particular, and unsurprisingly, Gladrags was the busiest, with many students purchasing their accessories, and some complete outfits even, though Honeydukes, Zonko's, and the other shops in the village all saw their fair share of traffic. Harry could not help but imagine that the merchants of Hogsmeade were grateful for the newly formed tradition, as it guaranteed that the students would be in a frenzy of buying in preparation for the ball.

"What about this one, Harry?"

Startled, Harry stared up at the face of his amused betrothed, wondering if his expression was as vacant as he imagined it was. Having sat there for the past half hour while she rummaged through baubles and accessories, Harry's attention had quickly wandered, and now he was uncertain as to what he was being asked.

"I think we've lost Harry's attention," Hermione said with a smirk. She had appeared from behind Fleur, with an expression which matched the one which currently graced the French witch's face.

"All right; you don't need to gang up on me," Harry grumbled under his breath.

Hermione's chuckle mingled with Fleur's silvery laugh. "All right, Harry, I think that's just about enough," said Fleur, finally taking pity on Harry. "Hermione and I will go and pay for our items, and we can move on."

Gratefully, Harry nodded and waited for a few moments while the ladies settled their accounts before he escorted them out into the street and on to the next shop. While the three had come to the village with all of their friends, the group had had different priorities, and most had separated to their different destinations upon arrival, agreeing to meet back at the Three Broomsticks later, and leaving Harry with his two closest female friends.

They made their way down the street to their next stop, the very small premises of Hogsmeade's only florist, Roses and Blooms. Though it was not a tradition in the Wizarding world, Harry had thought it would be nice for Fleur to wear a corsage to the ball, and they had decided on a nice wrist corsage which would go with her dress and complement Harry's robes. In truth, it had taken little persuasion to induce her to accept it—she was a woman, after all, and in Harry's limited experience, most women liked flowers. Even his aunt, who had at times not even seemed very feminine to Harry, almost melted the rare times that Vernon had brought home flowers for her.

It was at the florist where Harry had a slightly unusual conversation with Fleur which left him scratching his head.

"Harry," she said in a low voice, "why don't you get Hermione a corsage too?"

Hermione was at that moment admiring a beautiful, if odd, bloom on the far side of the room. This flower was obviously magical, considering the rainbow of petals, surrounding a center which was an amazingly bright shade of pink.

Sensing from Fleur's tone of voice that she did not want Hermione to overhear their conversation, Harry responded, matching Fleur's tone. "What? Why?"

Laughing lightly at what Harry could only assume with amusement at his cluelessness, Fleur put a hand on his arm and favored him with a bright smile. "She's your closest friend, Harry—I think it would be a nice gesture."

Now Harry was by no means any sort of Casanova—his experiences with Fleur were quite obviously his first in a romantic relationship with any female. But regardless of his lack of experience,

he was aware of the fact that a corsage was given to a woman by the man who was escorting her to a function, and the type of flower often said something about his intentions, or their status. As Harry was going with Fleur, would it not seem odd for him to give Hermione a corsage as well?

Well, perhaps it was not quite as Harry had stated. In fact, they had all agreed to go as a group, as most of the group was officially unattached. Of course it was obvious that Harry and Fleur were together, and Neville and Luna, though nothing had been said openly, had begun spending a considerable amount of time in one another's company. The twins were also seeing Angelina and Alicia as well, though in a very understated manner for the usually irrepressible duo. Still, if they all went as a group, no one would be left out and as Daphne had pointed out, there were more girls than guys, so this way it would be equitable and the girls would have to share. That still did not change the fact in Harry's mind that regardless of semantics, he and Fleur were going together.

As such, he voiced his thoughts, rather ineloquently, even to his own ears. "But Fleur, I'm going with you."

"That's not exactly true," was Fleur's reply.

"Technically it is," Harry insisted. "I'll spend most of the evening with you, and our relationship is hardly a secret."

"So what if it is or isn't?"

Harry regarded her as though she was daft—Fleur knew more about the Muggle world than she was letting on. "Giving a corsage to a woman is usually done when she's your date. And despite this 'going as a group' thing we've cooked up, you are my date."

"Perhaps, but I don't think corsages are strictly for one's date," Fleur responded. "Besides, they are not really used in the Magical world, Harry. No one will know what it means. You can use it simply as a gesture of your friendship."

"Hermione will," Harry countered.

"So?" said Fleur. "Tell her it's a mark of your esteem and in thanks for her continued support. And besides, Harry, she's a beautiful girl."

I think it's a mark of your affection and esteem that you would offer to get her a flower. She is your best friend."

Now Harry was becoming truly uncomfortable. Again, though he was not a complete dolt, he was aware of the fact that a girl would consider another getting too close to her boyfriend a rival, and would react accordingly. Fleur, however, appeared to be completely oblivious to the fact that she was talking Hermione's desirability up with all this talk of beauty and other attributes. Harry already knew his best friend was a very desirable girl—with the way Hermione had blossomed over the past year, he would have to have been blind not to notice. But he could never be with Hermione and would prefer to focus his attention on Fleur so he did not get... distracted.

"Umm, Fleur, aren't you... I mean... that is to say..." Pausing, Harry pulled a hand through his hair in agitation, wondering how he could possibly articulate his question. A glance at Fleur and he was astonished, as the blond seemed to be laughing at him. Laughing! Did she not know that this was a serious matter?

"Fleur, you know I have no interest in Hermione, right?"

"Oh?" Fleur said with a raised eyebrow.

Harry ignored the nervous butterflies fluttering around in his stomach and responded, "She's just a friend."

"Harry," Fleur chided, "I'm the one who suggested you get her a flower. I wasn't implying anything by it. I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

So it was that Harry ended up purchasing two corsages from the florist shop. And though Hermione was obviously appreciative of the gesture, Harry did not miss the long look his friend directed at his betrothed when the offer was made. This, of course, did not help Harry understand the situation any further, but when the girls turned their attention to the blooms their enthusiasm helped the awkward moment dissipate. In the end, they chose a pale yellow rose surrounded by small pink carnations, symbolizing friendship and love for Fleur, while Hermione received yellow rose with white carnations, symbolizing the same friendship, but loyalty and faithfulness as well.

Privately, Harry thought the flowers would look beautiful on the wrists of the two ladies, and though they would not tell him what their gowns looked like—or even their colors—they assured him that the flowers would complement them nicely. The rest of the afternoon, Harry spent in blissful contemplation, looking forward to the time he would finally see them.

"What was that all about?" Hermione hissed.

They had arrived at the Three Broomsticks and were sitting in one of the booths, and as Harry had left to visit the men's room, Hermione finally had a chance to demand what Fleur had been about with the flowers. It could not have been Harry's idea, after all—even he could not be that clueless.

Raising an eyebrow, Fleur replied, "What was what all about?"

"The flowers," Hermione sputtered, gesturing futilely. Hermione really liked her friend—they were almost to the point where they shared everything—but one of the things about Fleur which absolutely infuriated Hermione was her tendency to act innocent and sometimes downright stupid when she did not wish to speak about something, or knew that she had done something Hermione would not like.

"What, you don't like flowers?"

Hermione glared at her willful obtuseness. "You know what I'm talking about Fleur. Are you trying to push Harry toward me?"

"Perhaps you need a little push."

"Please don't do this, Fleur," Hermione begged. "I need to figure this on my own, and it's never going to happen if you interfere."

Fleur sighed and followed it up with a wry smile. "I won't, Hermione. I know that it is difficult for you. Part of me hopes that you will get on with this, but I know you need time. The flowers are really an understated thing, you know—no harm will come of it."

At that moment, Harry returned to the table, and the rest of their friends started wandering into the pub, so Hermione had to be satisfied with the answer she received. She would not, however,

stop watching her friend for any untoward behavior. Thus far Fleur had been very respectful of her need to decide this on her own and had not pushed. She supposed that the suggestion of the corsage was nothing more than Fleur had said it was, but Hermione could not help but suppose that it had been motivated—even if unknowingly—by a desire to induce Harry to see Hermione as she was—as a girl, rather than simply a best friend. So far Harry had not seemed to clue in to that possible ulterior motive, which suited Hermione just fine. She would not allow herself to be pushed into a decision before she was ready.

Another awkward moment—for Hermione, anyway—occurred early the next morning. Though mail was often light on a Sunday, most families tending to write to their charges on the weekend and send it so the mail arrived on Monday, that morning saw Fleur receive a short letter from her father. Hermione watched her as she opened it, noting the smile and the growing excitement with interest. It was not until Fleur turned to her that Hermione had any inkling that the letter had anything to do with her.

"My parents would like to invite you and your family to Chateau Delacour for Christmas," she said, her excitement coming out in a bubbly sort of way, which Hermione had rarely seen in the older girl.

Startled, Hermione said nothing for several moments, though she did catch odd looks from both Ron and Ginny. She immediately understood—even knowing that he would be spending it with Fleur and her family this year, it was likely a bit of a shock that Hermione would be invited and not them.

"Are you sure?" she finally responded. She was hesitant to accept, knowing that Harry still needed time with Fleur and her family—time to get to know them and become more comfortable with them. Hermione would just be in the way in that endeavor.

"Absolutely, Hermione. My parents like yours very much, and we would all be very happy if you would join us."

"You should go, Hermione," Ron spoke up. It was sudden and startling for Hermione, that he should speak up in such a fashion. Ron, however, did not notice her hesitation. "You've never spent a Christmas with Harry that didn't have something crazy happen—well except last year, and then we were all preoccupied with the ball and

everything that went with it. And it certainly wasn't like a Christmas should be."

Harry immediately voiced his support for the plan and Hermione directed a smile at both he and Ron, all the while feeling a little ashamed of herself. She had almost expected Ron to go on one of his jealous snits that she had been invited to spend the holidays with Harry, but he had not. She had not taken into account the fact that Ron had improved remarkably in the past few months; she resolved to do better in the future.

"But wouldn't you like to have Harry alone for the holidays?" Hermione asked in one last feeble attempt. "He's joining your family, after all."

Laughing, Fleur replied, "Actually I think it's more accurate to say that I am joining his family. But Harry and I have come a long way," she continued, directing a smile at Harry and taking his hand in her own, "and I think we can manage the distraction you would be."

Pretending affront, Hermione glared back at her friend. "In that case, I don't see how I could not serve as your... distraction."

Laughs echoed around the table, and Hermione smirked at a now complaisant Fleur. "I will have to ask my parents, of course."

"Of course," Fleur responded graciously.

"I'm glad you are considering it, Hermione," Harry said with a warm smile, and Hermione suddenly felt the butterflies fluttering in her stomach again. Harry had never realized the devastating effect of his smiles on half the girls in Hogwarts, and certainly not on herself. If he had, Hermione was certain he would quit smiling altogether, disliking the attention as much as he did. Moreover, she was very afraid that if he ever did learn how they affected her in particular, that she would not survive the experience.

And so it was done. Within a few days, Hermione had her reply from her parents—delivered by the ever-dependable Hedwig, whose services Harry had offered for the task. Her parents replied that they would be delighted to accept their invitation. And Hermione found that she could not but anticipate it keenly; a Christmas spent in the

company of her parents, her best friend, and her closest girl friend. What could be better?

The Yule Ball was in full swing and had been for several hours when Harry sank down into one of the chairs, grateful for the respite. He had danced nearly every dance that evening, with just about all of his friends, and had surprised himself by enjoying the festivities immensely. Given his experience at the last ball he had attended, he would have thought he would not have had a good time, but apparently the ability to choose one's own partner, rather than accepting one out of desperation—while pining after another girl—and the fact that he was not now the center of attention, worked wonders for his enjoyment. Hermione and Fleur, with whom he had spent the bulk of the ball, had just gone to refresh themselves, and Harry was happy for the respite which allowed him to rest for a few minutes.

"Well look who has deigned to join us mere mortals," Ron jibed good-naturedly from his side. The group of friends had commandeered a couple of tables to one side and sat there whenever they were not engaged in dancing. In addition to Ron, one of the twins was also present—his other half was somewhere on the dance floor—as well as Tracey, Ginny, Susan, and some of the other club members were sitting at nearby tables as well.

"I didn't know you were so much of a dancing machine, Harry," Ron continued in a teasing tone. "I'm not sure you've sat down the entire night."

"Not a whole lot," Harry agreed, feeling lethargic and companionable in the company of his friends. "I seem to have been in demand a lot tonight."

Tracey snorted. "When you speak like that, it's no wonder most of my house thinks you have a big head."

Lifting a glass in salute, Harry took a swig of his drink before setting it down. "That's because most of your house has never tried to get closer. I'm actually quite pleasant and rather dashing when you get to know me."

Another louder snort and roll of the eyes was all the answer Harry was to receive. He waggled his eyebrows and grinned at the girl,



noting the fact that when Tracey actually took the time and effort to do something about her appearance, she was actually rather pleasant to look at. He suspected she did not care much to please others, though part of her reticence might have been because she knew that she would never equal her closest friend in looks—Daphne was, after all, a very pretty girl.

In fact, he thought with a chuckle, he was not the only one who had noticed the beautiful Slytherin. From his first sight of her that evening, Ron had seemed smitten, and hardly able to tear his eyes away from her. Predictably, Daphne had rebuffed Ron's efforts to become "better acquainted", though Harry had not missed her secret smile at having an effect on the boy. They had danced a couple of times that evening, but if Harry were a betting man, he'd wager that no romance would result between the two. Daphne was a rather refined girl and Ron, while he'd certainly made progress, was still rough around the edges. He likely always would be, Harry thought fondly.

"Your vision in blue returns," the twin at the table spoke up, interrupting Harry's reverie, and he looked up and saw Hermione and Fleur making their way around the edges of the room towards him. He was once again struck by just how lovely they both were and was reminded of his reaction upon first seeing them.

Harry waited in the Gryffindor common room, pulling a little at the collar of his shirt. He was uncertain how a garment which had been worn by men for centuries could be so uncomfortable, and with the black bowtie, which seemed an indispensable accessory to the suit he was wearing, it seemed all the more uncomfortable and constricting. His suit was similar to that from the previous year, but of better cut and finer material. He had stayed with the mainstays of black trousers and a black jacket, over which he wore a long wizard's cape. The only article of his clothing, other than the shirt, which was not black, was the smart royal blue waistcoat he was wearing, an item Fleur had insisted upon. She told him it would go nicely with her ball dress, and Harry was not about to argue with his betrothed.

Ron was waiting with him, thankfully dressed in a set of black robes of his own and not in the awful old robes he had had the previous year, as were the rest of his group of friends. Or the boys were, at least—the girls had not yet seen fit to join them, understandable,

Harry supposed, due to the great effort they seemed to take with their appearance. Privately, though he would never say it to any of the girls of his acquaintance, he was glad it was the fairer sex who had to put up with such things as makeup and the like. Not only did it make them even more pleasant to look at, but it also meant that he did not have to deal with it himself.

They had waited for some time, lounging in the chairs in the common room and making small talk, when Neville, whom Harry had noticed becoming more impatient all the time, suddenly stood from his chair. "I'm going to go to the Ravenclaw common room and meet Luna. I'll see you all at the hall."

Though he managed his declaration with credible composure, he certainly could not have missed the snickers and the knowing looks which were directed at him as he exited the room. The shy Gryffindor had been gaining confidence and his interest in the flighty Ravenclaw had not gone unnoticed.

A noise on the stairs caught Harry's attention, and he looked up to see Angelina descend to the common room, followed by Alicia and Katie. They all looked smart in their dresses, and very pretty indeed. Harry, however, could not suppress a sting of disappointment that it had not been Fleur.

Angelina, apparently noticing his reaction, smiled at him merrily. "Don't worry, Harry; she's almost ready."

"Shall we stay around and watch as his eyes fall out of his head when she comes down?" Katie asked in a stage whisper.

Sniggers met Katie's comment, and Harry glared at her severely, which, of course, did nothing to suppress her mirth.

"Of course," Alicia said between giggles. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Over the next few moments, more Gryffindor girls descended the stairs, and though they were all dressed up and looked amazing, Harry had eyes for only one girl. It was, therefore, only a few moments later when she stepped down into the common room. Though he had known that he would be amazed, the fact was he was almost struck dumb with awe by just how wonderful she looked.

If she had been beautiful the previous year in her silver dress, this year she was positively breathtaking in her sky blue gown, a color which perfectly set off her fair skin and flowing blond hair. The gown was modest, though it had a touch of daring, as it had just one strap over her left shoulder, fitting tightly around her bust. It was gathered at the waist, and spilled down in pleated waves around her legs. The dress was accentuated by a wrap of the same shade as his waistcoat which was draped over her shoulders. Her hair was pulled up into an elaborate pile on the top of her head, and the earrings in her ears chimed as she moved. She was, in a word, beautiful.

And then she stepped aside and Hermione descended, and Harry felt all the air leave his lungs once again. The intervening year of growth and maturity had done wonders for Hermione. The previous year she had looked pretty in her blue dress; this year, she was amazing. The dress was a darker shade than the previous year, approaching a midnight blue. It was cut in an empire style, with the waist just below her breasts, from whence it spilled down her body in straight waves, hanging down to her ankles and shimmering in the light. Rather than do her hair up as she had done the previous year, she had gathered it in a knot at the base of her neck and allowed it to fall freely down her back. She looked enchanting and, Harry noticed distractedly, her dress also complemented his waistcoat nicely.

"Oh, Fleur, I think you broke him," said Hermione quietly, as they approached him. They were close enough that Harry did not think the rest of the room had overheard her comment, though further snickers were in evidence at his obvious reaction.

"We broke him," Fleur replied, the smugness in her voice unmistakable.

Hermione swatted at Fleur with mock displeasure before turning back to Harry and meeting his eyes. Though he had the impression that Fleur had meant for him to notice them both and was not put off in the slightest by his admiration of Hermione, in addition to herself, now was not the time to consider such things. Indeed, any rational thought seemed beyond him at the moment, swallowed up in the brilliance of the two dazzling enchantresses who stood before him.

Moving before he had any real conscious intention of doing so, Harry stepped forward and, taking Fleur's hands in his own, he leaned forward and kissed her, almost shocking himself in the process. The Harry of old would never have made such a blatant and open display of emotion.

"You look wonderful, my dear," he said as his lips grazed hers. "You will be the most beautiful girl at the ball."

He had not thought the confident and self-assured Fleur knew how to blush, but her cheeks and neck immediately bloomed, and she shyly returned his gaze and murmured her thanks. Harry was left wondering just how far down her blush extended. He then immediately shook his head mentally to free himself of that random thought, and returned her smile, noting to himself that regardless of his reactions or feelings, she was a wonderful girl who deserved his respect, and thinking in such a manner was not in any way respectful. At least at this point in their relationship...

Harry then turned to Hermione, who had been watching their display with amusement, and drew her forward to kiss her cheek. "I am amazed how much more beautiful you become every year, Hermione."

As if on cue, Hermione's cheeks immediately matched Fleur's and though she appeared unable to respond, her brilliant smile more than made up for it.

Turning, Harry grasped the two boxes which had sat beside him on the chair, all the while hearing the murmur of the other students in the room. Comments such as, "How romantic!" or, "When did our Harry become such a charmer?" echoed through his ears. But while he was normally reluctant to be in the spotlight, he decided that at this moment he simply did not care.

He pulled out the corsages, grateful for the kind witch at the shop who had put a stasis charm on them to keep them fresh, and fastened one on Fleur's wrist, and then the other on Hermione's. He then put the boxes aside and, smiling at the girls, extended one arm to each, and said, "Shall we?"

They exited the room and with their friends in tow, made their way down the stairways toward the Great Hall. Harry used this time to

clear his head of the muddle it had become, and to try to affect a more confident demeanor. It would not do to appear in the hall like a slobbering baboon, after all.

They had almost arrived when Ron sidled up to him, Hermione having dropped back to speak with Ginny. "Hey Harry, what's with the flowers?"

"It's a Muggle tradition," Harry replied. "At most formal occasions, a guy will get his girl a corsage for her to wear. The flowers can have special meaning as well."

"Then why did you get one for Hermione?"

Ron's tone was somewhat suspicious, but Harry, not really wanting to think about the matter further, deflected him with the answer which he and Fleur had discussed in the flower shop.

"She's always been my biggest supporter, Ron. I got her one in thanks for her friendship and help."

Though Ron's eyebrows furrowed in thought, he immediately nodded and smiled at Harry. "Well that's okay then, I guess."

Exaggeratedly, and with a certain level of satisfaction at the ability to tweak his friend's nose, Harry slapped Ron on the back. "Sorry, Ron—I didn't think you'd appreciate the flowers. Otherwise, I'd have gotten some for you too."

Ron's answering glare was enough to send both Fleur and Harry into gales of laughter. He walked away from them, feigning an injured air, saying, "Merlin! The guy gets a pretty girlfriend and suddenly he thinks he's a comedian."

Smiling to himself, Harry rose and greeted to the two girls, daring to bend and put a kiss on each of their hands, amid the sighs and giggles of the nearby girls. They both sat at the table and the group descended into chatter, while Harry gazed about him, taking in the sights and sounds of his second Yule Ball. The scene in the Great Hall was similar, yet subtly different from the previous year. While the theme still centered on winter, and the icy decorations and falling snow still dominated, there was more of a hint of reds and greens throughout the hall. In particular, the trees were decked with gaily

sparkling red garlands and blue fairy lights and the icicles and snowflakes twinkled with a decidedly red and greenish hue. It was all done in a very understated fashion, but it served to brighten and bring warmth to the room, which had been clearly cold, though beautiful, the previous winter. Harry wondered if the colors were meant to represent some Muggle Christmas traditions, and then if the Purebloods were aware of the fact that red and green were the de facto Christmas colors in the Muggle world. A quick glance at Malfoy, who was seated on the other side of the hall, revealed nothing, though the blond did not appear to be staring at Harry with anything more than his usual level of rancor. Professor Dumbledore did not reveal anything to Harry's quick glance either, as he merely smiled and winked before turning back to his conversation with Professor McGonagall.

Shrugging, and not considering the matter of any real importance, Harry turned his attention back to his friends. The current number had ended, and many of the club members had begun drifting over in their direction. As there was a lull in the music, due to the band taking a break, the area became quite busy with chatter and laughter, and Harry reveled in the feeling of interacting with close friends. The irrepressible twins immediately christened Harry's table the "champions table", as the only two champions from the previous year to be in attendance were both seated there. As always when the twins' antics were over the top, Harry merely rolled his eyes at them and returned to the conversation with his betrothed.

However, unlike earlier in the ball, when his gaze had been solely reserved for his affianced and closest friend, Harry kept one eye on another girl sitting at a nearby table. He was not in any way being unfaithful to his betrothed, but he had thought about his behavior the previous year, and realized that there was one to whom he owed an overdue apology. He was determined to make it that evening, in as public a setting as possible.

As the band returned to their instruments and the first strains of music once again settled over the Great Hall, Harry stood and excusing himself from his companions, made his way to the table to put his plan in motion. As he walked away, he noted Fleur's smile—he had made the French witch aware of his plans, and she had approved wholeheartedly.

He made his way around his friends—noting the fact that some were watching him curiously—and stopped in front of a pretty dark witch, who was dressed in a lavender gown. "Hello, Parvati, may I have this dance?"

The Indian witch looked up at him, startled, for several moments before she smiled and accepted. Harry led her to the floor, and they took their positions. The dance started and Harry began leading her about the floor, and though he was not a good dancer by any stretch of the imagination, he thought he managed to acquit himself admirably, and certainly better than he had the previous year.

"Parvati, I wanted to apologize for my behavior last year," Harry said once they began to dance. "I should have paid more attention to you and made sure we both had a good time. I failed you, and I wanted you to know that I am truly sorry for it."

She had clearly been expecting something of this nature, as Parvati immediately smiled and inclined her head. "It's okay, Harry. I know you had a lot going on with the tournament and all."

"That doesn't excuse how I acted," insisted Harry. "It was a night to have a good time and to make sure you had a good time, and I sat and brooded. I wanted to let you know that you're a beautiful girl, and that I shouldn't have treated you that way."

"It doesn't excuse it," she replied with a laugh. "But it does make it understandable. Thank you, Harry. I accept your apology. I should have known better than to expect more from it than you intended."

Confused, Harry looked at her in askance, wondering to what she referred.

Laughing, Parvati continued, "You really don't know what effect you have on girls, do you, Harry? I allowed myself to imagine I was a princess that night, and that you were the handsome prince who would sweep me off my feet."

Harry could only gape at her, wondering if she was having him on. Parvati only laughed harder at his incomprehension. After a few moments of merriment at his expense, she took pity on him.

"You excite the imaginations of so many, Harry, and you do it so effortlessly. It's not only your fame—though that's a part of it—but it's also your personality, how you try to make everyone feel like they are important. It's how modest and unassuming you are. Most girls in the school would give their right arms to be with you."

"I'm no prince, Parvati," Harry managed to stammer after a few moments, uncomfortable with the praise.

"No, you aren't," Parvati agreed. "You are a wonderful young man, who has his faults, as I unfortunately found out last year." Harry once again became shamefaced again at this observation, but Parvati was having none of it. "You have your faults like we all do, but still you're a wonderful person. If you ever have need of a second wife, please let me know—I'd be honored to accept the position."

Eyes widening with disbelief, Harry stammered, "S... Second wife?"

"Oh, Harry," Parvati said with a laugh, "don't worry—I was just joking. And besides, I think we all know who is most likely to get that particular title." This last was said with a smile and a glance in the direction of the tables, and Harry, though he had a suspicion that perhaps Parvati was aware of something he was not, would not have pursued that particular conversation for all the galleons in Gringotts.

By the time that Harry had recovered his composure, the dance had ended. Gratefully, he took Parvati's hand and escorted her from the floor, depositing her at her table with her friends. Padma, who had watched them with interest, smiled and nodded at Harry, and he smiled in return, before excusing himself.

He sank down in his seat beside Fleur gratefully, wondering if he would ever understand women. Fleur smiled and kissed him on the cheek, telling him that it was right for him to make the apology in the manner that he had, and that she was proud of him for doing it. Knowing that his closest male friend had made a similar impression the previous year, Harry tried to catch Ron's eye, and gestured with his head toward where the twins were sitting. Ron, however, had already risen from his seat. A few moments later, he led the other Indian witch to the dance floor, presumably to make his own apology.



The prevailing mod amongst Harry's extended group of male friends was that Fleur was absolutely stunning that evening, a sentiment with which Harry had no argument. And it was a good thing that the other girls, who were all very pretty themselves, did not appear to hold any grudge that Fleur outshone them all. However, though Fleur had had compliments aplenty, no one put it in quite the manner which Seamus did. As a self-appointed connoisseur of feminine attraction, Seamus spoke up a few moments after the Ron had left for his dance.

"Harry, you are one lucky bugger," he said in a rather inelegant and blunt manner.

Though Harry would never count Seamus as a close friend, they had mended their differences to a certain extent, enough that Seamus did not question Harry's assertion that Voldemort had indeed returned. Thus, Harry was more than willing to banter with the other boy.

"I can't really argue with that statement."

"Nor should you," Seamus responded with a snort. "I mean, you have the audacity to become betrothed over the summer, which keeps you out of trouble with the Ministry. And instead of being tied to some warty old witch—which would have been poetic justice, by the way—instead you end up with the most beautiful witch any of us has ever laid eyes on."

Again Fleur blushed, though she directed a quelling look at Seamus. Harry was enjoying himself far too much to protest. "I think anyone would count themselves lucky to be betrothed with Fleur. Who wouldn't be attracted to her?"

A chuckle from Harry's side focused his attention on Dean. "I'm pretty sure I know he wouldn't be," he said, cocking his head towards a table across the hall."

Everyone listening to the conversation followed his direction and looked over, where it was obvious to whom Dean was referring. Malfoy sat at the table surrounded by Pansy, his goons and a few others of Slytherin house, and the glare he was directing at Harry appeared to be the garden variety glare which he usually used absently whenever Harry was in the area. It was a glare which

seemed to accuse Harry of being alive, rather than containing the burning hatred which would have incinerated him on the spot had Malfoy had the power to do so.

"Malfoy?" Seamus demanded with scorn. "Who cares what he thinks? Besides, it's not surprising he wouldn't be attracted to such a fine specimen of female beauty—he's always been a bit of a poof anyway, don't you think?"

The entire table burst out into laughter, and Seamus, grinning, affected an expression of innocence. "What? You know he's always hanging around with those two gorillas. I'm betting that his thing with Parkinson is just a screen—he doesn't really pay her a lot of attention, does he?"

The laughter grew exponentially, and as the entire area's attention was on Malfoy, it was easy for the ponce to deduce that their laughter was at his expense. If his deepening scowl was any indication, it seemed like their merriment was not endearing those involved to him. The outburst also caught the attention of the rest of the occupants of the hall, though most of them merely shook their heads and went back to whatever they were doing before the interruption. Dumbledore did allow himself a smile of indulgent amusement before he returned his attention to his discussion with the other professors.

Of course Fleur, not being a native speaker and still having some difficulty with colloquial English, was lost by Seamus's statement. "A poof?"

This, of course, sent Harry into further spasms of laughter, and it was several moments before he—or anyone else—was able to respond. Even Hermione, straitlaced as she was, had laughed, though she had tried to affect a stern and disapproving demeanor. Predictably, it was the aforementioned Hermione who recovered enough to attempt an explanation.

"A poof is... well..." she stammered and stuttered, clearly uncomfortable with trying to explain such a matter to Fleur.

"It's a guy who likes other guys," Luna butted in. She had been nearby listening to the conversation the entire time, sitting with

Neville, and though she appeared to be as airy and spacey as she usually was, her eyes gleaming rather suspiciously.

The information caused Fleur's eyes to widen. "You are calling him a... un... pédé? Un homosexuel?"

"That's exactly what we're saying," Seamus responded with a smirk, to everyone's continued amusement.

Fleur watched Malfoy critically for several moments before she turned back to Harry with a slightly mischievous smile on her face. "You know, he might have a point."

Harry laughed with the others and then stopped to think in a most exaggerated manner. "Hmm... I wonder if I could put that into my repertoire of insults I keep especially for the little prick."

When he noticed Hermione's disapproving glare amidst the laughter, Harry held his hands up in defeat. "Don't worry, Hermione—I have no plans to use this insult against him. I somehow don't think he'd respond very well. He seems to have a rather high opinion of his... virility."

A swell of laughter once again echoed through the group. It was at that moment when the band began to play again, and Harry rose and extended his hand to Fleur in invitation, which she accepted with a smile.

It was a slow song and though there were no specific steps to be adhered to, Harry was quite content to hold her close and sway to the music. They continued thus for some time before Fleur let out a sigh and leaned closer, resting her head upon Harry's shoulder. "I'm glad we decided to move our relationship forward, Harry," she said. "There are certainly some benefits to be had."

Chuckling, Harry pulled her closer and continued to dance with her, reflecting upon how nice and how right this felt. Benefits indeed.

For Fleur, the night was magical, and everything she had hoped the last Yule Ball could have been. But whereas that last ball had begun with promise and ended with disappointment and an unwanted level of attention, this one was made enjoyable by one whom she truly esteemed, and had not been ruined by Roger, who she had seen

around the hall, but who had been intelligent enough to keep his distance.

She was thrilled at the reaction Harry had had to her appearance earlier, and while she knew that true relationships were not built upon nothing more than physical attraction, she knew that it was an important component. If his looks and glances since then were any indication, she knew that she would not have to worry about his level of attraction to her, regardless of whether or not their feelings ever progressed as far as Fleur hoped.

And they were progressing. As a Veela and being in tune with the emotion of love, she knew that the first stirrings were beginning for both of them. It was thrilling—she could never have imagined that they were moving to such a level so effortlessly when she had first learned of the betrothal.

"A knut for your thoughts?"

Harry's voice broke through Fleur's reverie, and she smiled at him as they continued to dance across the floor. "Nothing in particular. I was just thinking about how far we've come and how easy it's been."

"Well, it helps when a guy gets such an amazing betrothed," Harry said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"Flatterer!" Fleur accused with a laugh.

"It's true," was his quiet reply. "I didn't know last year how amazing you are because I never really took the time to get to know you. But you are amazing, Fleur. I'm happy that everything has worked out the way it has."

Unable to respond with words, a very pleased and emotional Fleur stretched up and kissed his lips softly, and though the action was chaste, it conveyed a depth of emotion—returned by Harry—that left Fleur almost breathless.

The romantic interlude continued for some moments before they both broke it off, neither completely comfortable with such overt displays of affection in the middle of a dance floor. As they continued to move together in complete harmony, Fleur was led to reflect again upon how the situation had worked out, and to be

grateful that Harry was who he was. If he had been a different person, it could have turned out much, much worse. But with Harry, she could almost taste the happiness in her future.

The evening had grown late and many of the students had already sought their beds, though the more adventurous or those who were attending with their special someone were still in attendance. The last dance was important for such couples, after all.

Of those few not dancing, Hermione Granger sat at the table she and her friends had occupied all evening. On the whole, it had been a satisfying evening, she thought, even though she had not had a specific date like she had had last year. In fact it was even more pleasant—Victor had behaved like a gentleman, but he had really been quite dull. He had been very nice and attentive, but he had come off as slightly less than gifted intellectually, and had not been able to carry on a conversation about anything other than Quidditch. She could never have dated him, though his request for her to go to Bulgaria to visit him, coupled with his request to write, had made it appear like he, at least, had hoped for such a relationship to develop.

Tonight she had danced with many of her friends, but for the most part she stayed with Harry and Fleur. Though Fleur had obviously been Harry's first priority, Hermione felt that Harry had likely danced almost an equivalent number with her as with Fleur. Of course, she could not help but feel that some of the Purebloods in the room watched her, knowing of the possibility of Harry having more than one wife, and wondering if she would accept such a proposal. When she had first realized it, she had been irked, but she had quickly come to the conclusion that it did not matter, and had taken to ignoring the looks, both real and imagined.

Now as she sat, drained by the evening's activities, watching the proceedings, she vacillated between being disinterested, while on the other hand being slightly envious of her fair-haired friend. She was well aware of the fact that she should not feel this way—it had always been a foregone conclusion that Harry would dance the last with Fleur. Hermione liked Fleur and considered her to be a close friend; they were very good for each other, she felt, and would make each other happy.

That did not stop her from wishing that she was in Fleur's place, dancing with the boy that she not-so-secretly fancied. The feeling

was especially unnecessary given what Fleur had offered her—the chance to be with Harry as well.

To say that Hermione was still conflicted and uncertain was certainly an understatement. Much as she wanted to accept Fleur's proposal with alacrity, she was held back by her insecurities. She was well aware of the fact that Fleur thought she was still hesitating because of the Muggle world's view of plural marriage, but while that did give her pause, it was certainly not the main source of her indecision.

Hermione was afraid, plain and simple. It had seemed like such good advice at the beginning—Fleur had been certain that Hermione would be on equal footing, as her relationship with Harry was of long standing, and that would balance whatever inequality she imagined there existed in their looks. There was no denying it—while Hermione knew that she was a pleasant, and perhaps even attractive girl, she could in no way compare with the beauty that Fleur possessed.

And therein was the crux of the problem. Hermione felt even now that she would be forever overshadowed by Fleur, especially now that Harry and Fleur's relationship appeared to be progressing at a steady pace. She knew it was stupid to feel this way; she knew that Harry had a big heart and that he was not ruled by the more superficial things in life. If she were ever to be married to Harry, she knew that he would cherish her as much as he did Fleur. But the knowledge still did not overcome her fears, regardless of how much she told herself that her fears were silly.

Sighing, Hermione sat back in her chair and forced her gaze away from the dancing couple. She was still young—only sixteen!—and she had plenty of time to figure this dilemma out. It was not a decision she had to make any time soon.

"Boyfriend trouble, Granger?"

Startled, Hermione whipped her head back around to see that Malfoy had approached her and was staring at her with a sardonic eye.

"Bugger off, Malfoy."

The blond ponce merely smirked. "Oh it's quite obvious; you moon around Potter like he's the second coming of Merlin. It's quite pathetic, actually."

Hermione turned away and ignored him, but Malfoy appeared not to notice. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that his attention was focused on Harry.

"It's too bad about Potter, really," he continued in a slightly introspective tone. It was obvious to Hermione that he was thinking out loud, and was not truly paying attention to her. "I mean, even though he's just a Halfblood, he could be acceptable due to his family's long heritage, even if they have polluted their bloodline frequently with the blood of their inferiors.

"But he's blind to the reality of his situation. The Potters have a long history, and with his fame and fortune he could literally have almost anything—or anyone—he wanted. Instead he saddles himself with creatures and Mudbloods. I could have protected him from that, but he chose to become my enemy instead."

"Maybe he finds you and those who agree with you nauseating," was Hermione's terse response. "I know I do."

"You would," was Malfoy's sarcastic response. "Those who are inferior must cling to something to justify their existence. Really, I can see no difference between a Mudblood like yourself, and the Veela. One flavor of filth is really not much different from another flavor, after all."

"You're so charming, Malfoy," Hermione drawled. "I can't imagine how any girl wouldn't swoon at the sound of your honeyed tones making love to them."

An elegant eyebrow rose at her declaration. "Well, I am a Pureblood, after all. Any girl would be lucky to have me."

"Modesty is such an attractive trait." Hermione's tone was practically scathing, but it did not appear to faze Malfoy in the slightest.

"Those who have something to be modest about can be modest. I have no such need."

"You're delusional."

Malfoy smirked and paused to rake his eyes over her form, a leer coming over his face. "You know, Granger, if you're having trouble getting a boyfriend, maybe you should try me out. I bet I could show you a good time—better than that wimp Potter, anyway."

"You have such a way with words," Hermione simpered outrageously. "Any girl would swoon if you spoke to them that way. But what about Parkinson? Isn't she your betrothed?"

"Pansy will do what she's told. Besides, I can have more than one wife, or didn't you know that?" He regarded her critically. "Though the title 'wife' is a little too good for a Mudblood such as yourself. How about 'plaything' instead?"

"You've a much higher opinion of yourself than you ought, given the fact that you've never managed to best me or any of my friends." It appeared that reminding him of his frequent failures was making him cross, as his expression darkened in response to her retorts. "And just for the record—I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot wand, Malfoy, so I suggest you confine your wooing to someone stupid enough to saddle herself with you."

"Malfoy!" a voice surprised both of them, and Hermione looked up to see Harry standing there, staring at Malfoy with an annoyed expression on his face. Of course, that was normal when it came to the Slytherin. "Don't you have some rock you need to go crawl back under?"

"Potter," Malfoy snarled in return. "I'm just having a private conversation with Granger here. Why don't you butt out?"

"I'm sure she has better things to do than banter with you," Harry rejoined. "You can run along now, and don't forget to not come back."

Hermione thought that Harry was showing remarkable restraint, given the history between himself and Malfoy. But the Slytherin was not about to depart without one final jab at his nemesis.



"One of these days, Potter, you will be put in your place. And I aim to be there to witness it." With that he turned and stalked off.

Harry was all solicitous with Hermione, questioning her closely about what Malfoy had said to her and how he behaved, and his concern touched her heart. She assured them she was fine and that she had been able to handle Malfoy without any help, and even then her friends were not truly mollified. Still, Malfoy was Malfoy and there was not a whole lot they could do but ignore him. And put him in his place when he crossed the line, of course.

"I can't imagine that he'd think you would give him the time of day," Fleur commented once Hermione had finished telling her story.

"He does ooze slime in a rather... Malfoy-esque fashion," Harry opined, prompting a look of amusement from Hermione.

"Oh, and this is the result of your determination to insult him less?" Hermione teased.

Harry merely smiled and assumed a rather arrogant pose. "That's only in public. When I'm by myself or with my friends, I feel no need to censor myself. I'm only telling the truth—he is slimy, you know!"

Laughing, the three friends left the Great Hall and followed the other students, who were even now exiting now that the ball had come to an end. They mingled for some time, ultimately making their way back to Gryffindor tower. There, Harry gallantly kissed each of their hands, thanking them for a wonderful evening, and wishing them a good night. Hermione entered her dorm smiling and thinking that if she ever did decide to accept Fleur's offer, that she would certainly not be disappointed with Harry. He was everything she could ever want in a man. Now if she could only convince herself that it would work out between the three of them.

A/N: Thanks to everyone for your continued support. The story continues, though this chapter was not heavy on action. Things will begin to pick up very soon with events, though there will not be a lot of true action until closer to the end of the story.. The next chapter features an event which occurs in canon, but with my particular spin on it.

## Chapter 27 – Two Kinds of Trouble

The problem with this particular Yule Ball was the fact that the Hogwarts Express was due to depart the following morning. It was true that most of the students—even the boys, who would normally be almost allergic to such an activity as dancing—enjoyed themselves very much. However, as most of the students had stayed at the ball until at least midnight, and almost no one had been in bed before two, the idea of rising at seven to eat breakfast and prepare for their departure was not exactly welcome. Thus, it was a rather tired and grumpy school of students who gathered in the Great Hall the following morning, minus those who were to stay at the school over the holidays, of course—those few souls were rather smug in their ability to sleep in.

Not much was said over breakfast by any of Fleur's friends, most concentrating on their breakfast and the fight to stay awake. Fleur, having completed most of her schooling at Beauxbatons, and having experience with their more sensible custom of Flooing to and from the school, was amused by the lethargy of her less than chipper friends, thinking that the ride on the Hogwarts Express was likely to be as subdued as any in recent memory.

Soon breakfast was eaten, bags were packed, and the entire school made their way to the train station and boarded the train, settling in for the long trip home. Fleur's group of friends situated themselves in two adjacent compartments and hunkered down for the long trip and, as Fleur had surmised, most of them immediately rolled up their jackets or other articles of clothing, rested their heads upon them, and promptly fell asleep. But though she was fatigued herself, Fleur found that she was unable to join them, as she was simply too keyed up with anticipation for the coming days.

Since their relationship had begun to deepen, Fleur's level of excitement for her future and the future of her relationship with Harry had risen accordingly. She could now see a very happy future with her betrothed, something in which she had not always held a high level of confidence. She had always known that she would be content—Harry's personality was such that even if he was never able to give her anything more than his hand in marriage, she would at least never suffer as his wife. But being Veela, love was an intrinsic part of her makeup, and she knew that if she and Harry had never developed a true bond of love that something would always

have been missing from her life. Harry had still not actually said the words to her—it would have been too early for such a step in any case—but Fleur knew that he was feeling the first stirrings of love in his heart, and it thrilled Fleur. Her hope was flourishing and she did not now doubt that it would come to fruition. It was more than she had dared to hope.

"Weighty thoughts."

The sudden words startled Fleur from her reverie and she turned her head and noticed Hermione watching her with a slight smile on her face. A quick glance around the compartment revealed that everyone else was asleep.

"Not precisely weighty," she responded in a low voice, "but rather happy ones instead, I must say."

Hermione cocked her head to the side, saying, "Can you share?"

Speaking over Harry—who was resting between them—was not ideal, but Fleur gamely leaned forward and continued speaking, again quietly so as to avoid waking anyone. "Just that Harry and I seem to be progressing much more quickly than I had any right to expect."

"And that's where we differ," Hermione said with a wry smile. "Personally, I think you had every right to expect that your relationship would progress quickly. It may not have been evident back in the summer, but you are actually quite well suited, and though Harry is not shallow, who wouldn't be drawn to you? You are very beautiful, Fleur."

As usual, Fleur was somewhat embarrassed at the reference of her physical attributes. There had been times in the past where she had wished she was not considered to be 'beautiful' due to the problems it had sometimes brought her way.

"I know you don't want Harry to be drawn to you simply for your looks," Hermione continued, "but you are well aware of the fact that it's not just that. He'd have to be dense not to realize your excellent qualities."

"I've certainly noticed his," Fleur said with a fond glance at her betrothed. In truth she'd known of them almost from the start. At least she had after their first meeting and her unfortunate "little boy" comment, when she had started knowing him a little better. Perhaps it was best that she had not grown up with the constant Boy-Who-Lived focus which existed in British society—it allowed her to see Harry for what he was, rather than the preconceived notions of him that his countrymen appeared to have.

"But it's all so new to me," said Fleur with a sigh. "I expected to have a great deal of difficulty in finding a mate who would look past my looks or my heritage, and having one essentially fall into my lap has at times been disconcerting."

Hermione's visage became amused. "What, the ever-composed and confident Fleur has been disconcerted? You've destroyed my faith in the order of the world!"

Leaning over, Fleur swatted Hermione's knee playfully, earning nothing more than a laugh from her friend. "I'll have you know that I'm certainly not always confident!" Fleur replied with a mock glare. Hermione said nothing, but her grin was unmoved.

"What about you?" Fleur asked. She was a little hesitant about bringing up the subject as she was certain Hermione was not ready to make a choice, but her curiosity and some of the signs she was seeing suggested that her friend's feelings for Harry were deepening rapidly. "Have you given any further thought about what we discussed?"

Sighing, Hermione leaned back against the seat, making it difficult for Fleur to see her around Harry. Hermione did not reply immediately and Fleur, sensing that she was working through her own feelings, left her to her thoughts, waiting patiently for her to respond.

Finally, Hermione sighed yet again, and glanced back at Fleur, her expression rueful and somewhat frustrated. "I have," she confirmed. "In fact, sometimes I wonder if I've thought of anything else."

"And?" Fleur prompted after Hermione had fallen silent for several moments.

"And nothing," was Hermione's simple reply. "I have strong feelings for Harry; you already know this and have known from the beginning. But I have no more answer for you today than I did back in the summer, or even October for that matter. I don't know if my feelings are strong enough to encourage me to live in that kind of relationship, and until I do, I'd prefer to keep it to myself."

"Does it matter?" Fleur asked. "If you love Harry as much as I expect you do, I would think that that would overcome any other concerns."

"But there are still other problems," insisted Hermione. "I come from the Muggle world, and I'm not sure my parents would understand or accept it if I decided to pursue this. And that's not even considering the question of whether I can be with a man who is with another woman at the same time."

"I know it's hard," Fleur replied, trying to be sympathetic to her friend's struggles.

"It is," Hermione agreed. Her gaze then shifted from introspective to piercing, and she affixed upon Fleur. "What about you? Are you certain this is a wise course for you? Wouldn't feel jealous if Harry also loved another woman? And if I actually agree with this and am able to convince Harry, wouldn't you be jealous when he's... with me?"

"I have considered all this," said Fleur with a sigh. And she had—she herself had questioned the wisdom of pursuing this path constantly. In fact, the deeper her relationship with Harry became, the stirrings of doubt had begun to assail her more than she would have liked. Could she truly abide seeing Harry with another woman with whom she suspected he held a much deeper relationship than the one he had with herself? But she was firm, telling herself that Harry deserved this, for what he would otherwise be required to give up with Hermione. She would never wish to come between him and anyone else, regardless of what he was gaining by the enactment of this betrothal.

"The quick answer is that I don't know for certain. But I do know that I would never stand in the way of Harry's happiness."

"Fleur maybe you should consider the possibility that you can give Harry all the happiness he needs without sacrificing so much."

Hermione's words were gentle and understanding, but laced with a certain firmness that Fleur had often heard from the girl when she was trying to make a point.

"I am actually becoming more and more confident that I can make Harry happy," Fleur responded with a smile. "But I also know he is in love with you. This is an exception which I think is easy for me to make. It would not be nearly as easy if it was, say, Lavender Brown."

Hermione laughed. "I definitely don't think Lavender is his type."

"That's a relief!"

The two friends shared a moment of humor, which effectively broke the somewhat serious mood which had descended over them. "I know you've thought this over from every angle, and I won't push," Fleur continued, smiling at the younger girl. "But I won't promise not to be curious."

"I'm certain you won't!"

The topic was dropped and after a few moments of desultory conversation on other topics Hermione's eyelids began to droop, and she settled in next to Harry, fast asleep within a few moments.

Though she would have liked to join her friends in slumber, Fleur still felt wide awake. She spent a few moments considering Hermione's words and the dilemma which faced her, but nothing new which would help her came to mind; she would simply have to allow Hermione to work through her feelings in her own way. As for her own feelings, well, that was something she would just have to work through as she went along. Hermione's insight had touched a number of feelings and thoughts she had had herself, especially since her first kiss with Harry, and they affected her level of security with this path she had chosen. Still, she had made the decision, and she would stick by it.

By the time she had settled this within her own mind, Hermione had toppled slightly from where she had been resting, until her head now lay on Harry's shoulder. Fleur allowed herself a soft smile at the sight—it was rather endearing to be honest, just exactly how comfortable they were with each other. She was certain of

Hermione's feelings for Harry, and she hoped that Hermione would come to terms with them in time.

It was at that moment that the door to the compartment opened. Fleur looked up to see Ginny Weasley standing, obviously ill at ease, gazing into the compartment with a slightly bashful expression on her face. She relaxed slightly when she saw that most of the compartment's occupants were asleep and, after taking a deep breath, apparently to calm herself, she addressed Fleur.

"Umm... Fleur," she stuttered. "I was... wondering if I might have... a word with you."

"Sure, Ginny," Fleur replied before rising to follow the younger girl from the cabin.

In truth, Fleur had been waiting for this for some time. Though a multiple marriage was not exactly a common occurrence, the rules and customs were set out and established by tradition. It was the prospective bride's responsibility for approaching the first wife to gauge her receptiveness to her as an additional wife. While this did not need to be done from the first moment of acquaintance with the man, it was definitely required before anything formal—or even information—was decided upon. It was a quirky custom perhaps, as it completely bypassed the husband, but as the wife held the authority as to whether or not a woman would be allowed to marry her husband, Fleur supposed it made sense.

For Ginny in particular, it was quite obvious that the girl still harbored hopes to become one of Harry's wives. Thankfully, she had been much more discreet about her feelings, even going so far as to attempt to be a friend to Harry, rather than see him through the prism of the Boy-Who-Lived, or a prospective husband. But still, Fleur had seen enough of her behavior the previous evening to know that her dream was alive and well—her eyes had hardly left him the whole night, and the moment when he had asked her to dance, almost two-thirds of the way through the evening, her face had lit up with equal parts pleasure and shyness. It had been obvious to anyone who had happened to have been looking at the time, as Fleur had.

Fleur was aware of enough of her history to know that Ginny's mother had filled her head with dreams of the Boy-Who-Lived since

she was old enough to understand. But though Fleur was not exactly privy to Harry's thoughts, she was almost certain that he did not have any feelings for Ginny beyond that of a younger sister. Ginny was almost certain to be disappointed.

The moment the door closed behind the two girls, Harry's eyes snapped open and he looked through the window after Fleur's retreating form with some incredulity. Had Hermione and Fleur just been speaking of what he thought they had been speaking of?

Unlikely as it seemed, it all made sense. The way the two of them had hit it off from the time Harry had become betrothed to Fleur, the manner in which they sometimes appeared to be speaking, yet avoiding any chance of his overhearing, the comment that Parvati had made the previous night, and now the conversation between them—which had been extremely light on specifics, beyond the two girls' feelings, he admitted—all added up to one thing that Harry could never in his wildest dreams have imagined. Fleur was encouraging Hermione to consider becoming a second wife.

Was such a thing even legal? He supposed it must be, if Fleur had suggested it, and Hermione was actually considering it. What he was not aware of was exactly how he felt about the idea. Or perhaps he did. Turning his head slightly, Harry gazed at the form of his best friend as she slept, her head comfortably resting on his shoulder. He was well aware now of the feelings he had for Hermione, feelings which he had not even known existed before the previous summer—or perhaps more accurately he had simply not understood them—but had been trying, rather unsuccessfully, to suppress since he had become aware of them. If Hermione was amenable to the idea and it was actually legally possible, how could Harry not jump at the chance?

Then why did he feel so guilty, like he was betraying Fleur? Was it natural to feel so deeply for two women? Besides, was it not greedy in the extreme to even be considering marrying the two most wonderful girls he had ever known? And was it even possible?

Of course no answers came to Harry, and for a moment he actually considered approaching the two girls and asking them what they were about. And then reality set in and Harry thought of the awkwardness of asking such a thing. No, he would not approach the two girls. He would figure out the answer for himself. Surely there



had to be some information on the subject in the library at Hogwarts, perhaps in a book on Wizarding customs, or something about marriage. That was what he would do—he would search for himself. As for Hermione and Fleur, he would allow them to continue on as they were. Hermione had some valid concerns, and she would need to resolve this dilemma on her own. But Harry would discover what the possibilities were and be ready with his answer, if she ever came to the resolution that she wanted to be with him. He fidgeted a little in his seat to find a comfortable position and allowed his head to tilt to the side until it was resting upon the crown of Hermione's head. He knew his feelings for Hermione and knew what he wanted his answer to be. But he would never hurt Fleur. If they were both able to convince him that it was what they wanted, the decision on his part would likely be an easy one.

Fleur and Ginny adjourned to the entrance to the next car back, where they could be assured of some privacy, and Ginny turned, her nervousness obvious. Fleur was filled with compassion for the young girl—whether she ended up with Harry or not, she was a good girl and Fleur had no wish to see her hurt.

"Fleur," Ginny began hesitantly, "I wanted to ask you... Well, what I mean to say was..." Ginny trailed off for a moment before she visibly squared her shoulders and said in a rush, "I was wondering if you'd consider me for a possible second wife for Harry."

Amused, Fleur smiled at Ginny, hoping to put her at ease. "I'm not exactly married to Harry yet, you know," replied, trying to be as gentle as she possibly could. "Isn't it customary to approach the 'wife' after she has already married the man?"

"Perhaps," Ginny said with a tremulous smile. "But I'd like to get it out there from the start."

"Ginny, why do you want to formalize this now?" Fleur asked. "You're only fourteen—surely you have some time before you need to worry about betrothals."

"I know that," was the girl's stubborn reply. "But I've spent my whole life dreaming of being Harry's wife, and being his friend the past few months has shown me what a great guy he is."

That essentially sealed the deal—it was obvious where Ginny had gotten her obsession; her mother had to have been encouraging this. Though Fleur could not say to precisely what extent Mrs. Weasley had encouraged Ginny, or even whether or not she had been right to do it, she did, at that moment, wish that Ginny was not quite so single-minded on the subject. However, as Fleur had already told herself, Ginny was a nice girl. Perhaps she just needed the facts to be laid out to her now so that it was very clear. Then she could move on with her life and allow things to develop as they would without trying to force the issue.

"Listen, Ginny," Fleur told her, "I will never stand in the way of Harry's happiness in any way. If he at all returned your feelings, I would have no problem at all approving you as another wife. However..." Fleur could see Ginny's expression which had brightened as Fleur had spoken, fall once again, and she could sympathize with the girl. But, this needed to be said, and she would not sugar-coat the stark reality of the situation.

"However, I suspect that Harry does not see you that way," she continued. "If you watch him closely, I think he sees you as a sister and friend. Before the beginning of the school year, I believe you were nothing more than his best friend's sister, but you've certainly made a lot of progress in that regard."

Ginny thought about it for several minutes, her slightly tremulous countenance betraying her dismay. "But if I've made progress, couldn't it become something more in time?"

"Absolutely it could," Fleur agreed. "Ginny, I don't want to discourage you, but I also don't want you to get your hopes up too much. For the time being, I certainly will not formalize anything more, unless it is Harry's desire. We are just getting used to each other—we don't need another relationship right now to complicate things."

"You'll approve of it in the future?"

The request was given so earnestly, Fleur had to smile. The girl was persistent, if nothing else. "Again, it will depend on Harry. If he wants it, and if he is in love with you, then I won't stand in his way. But I will be completely honest—I suspect that there is someone else who is much more likely to become a second wife, if she decides she wants to take that step."

Seeming to intuitively understand exactly of whom Fleur was referring, Ginny nodded her head in a thoughtful manner; at least Fleur had given her pause, and something to think about.

"I'll give you some advice, Ginny," said Fleur. "Try to live your life without this all-consuming desire to be noticed by Harry. You've made a lot of progress in becoming Harry's friend, but I truly believe that you need to consider other options. Or maybe you don't even need to consider this subject at all right now—you are only fourteen, after all. You don't need to find your life mate now."

"You don't think I'm compatible with Harry?" Ginny asked.

"I don't necessarily have an opinion about that at all. All I'm saying is that you should allow yourself to consider other possibilities. You don't want to be stuck in a marriage down the road and find out that you should really have gotten to know your spouse better, or realized that you really didn't want to be only one of his wives. Take some time when you're young to allow yourself to see beyond what you've always imagined. The possibility that you have never even considered may be better than the future you've always thought you might have."

Pleased at the thoughtful expression that now adorned Ginny's face, Fleur squeezed the girl's shoulder with some affection, and turned to go back to the compartment. As she was leaving, Ginny called her again, and she turned to once again regard the young girl.

"Thanks for the advice," she said with a bashful smile. "I think you're right, but don't be surprised if we're having this conversation some time when I'm older."

"You're welcome," said Fleur. "And I think I can safely say that when it comes to Harry, nothing surprises me."

They shared a laugh before Fleur left Ginny to her thoughts and once again returned to the compartment where her friends still slept. This time, however, she was feeling the fatigue of the late night and, hoping that her thoughts had been corralled sufficiently, she sat on the bench and leaned up against Harry. She was fast asleep within minutes.

The express stopped at the station and within moments its occupants had disembarked for the holidays. Leave-takings were kept short, as the separation between most friends was to be no more than two weeks. And though Ginny bid a fond farewell to all of her friends, a part of her could not but be disappointed and a little jealous of Hermione's good fortune. Her separation from Harry would be of only a few days' duration, after all. Ginny, together with her brothers, approached her parents who were waiting for their arrival and, after their greetings were exchanged, they left the platform and exited the platform.

It was only a few moments later that they were home—Ginny's parents had simply side-long apparated them from a secluded alley, first Ginny and Ron, then returning for the twins. Grateful at last to be home, Ginny immediately made her way up the stairs to her room, intent upon thinking about her conversation with Fleur, not to mention all that had happened since she left for Hogwarts in August. At least this was one of her reasons for her quick retreat; the other was the fact that she had felt her mother's eyes upon her since she had greeted her parents at the station, and her mother's brief absence while she returned to fetch the twins seemed like a good opportunity to escape having to speak about the situation with Harry for a while. Besides, she wanted to work her way through her feelings before her mother began demanding that she answer the inevitable questions. Entering her room, Ginny sighed and, dropping her bag by the side of the bed, sank down onto the bed and lay back against her pillow.

Her mind instantly focused itself upon the things of which she had spoken with Fleur. She was not unhappy with the other girl—nothing could be further from the truth. She was more... disappointed than anything else. Fleur had brought up some extremely good points, after all, things which Ginny had never considered before. Had she been closed to all other possibilities, focused to the exclusion of all else of her desire to one day be with Harry? Until Harry's trial and subsequent betrothal to Fleur, Ginny would have said no. In fact, she had made a resolution with herself upon returning from school the previous June; frustrated by her inability to even hold a coherent conversation with Harry, she had determined that she would stop trying so much, and simply allow herself to have fun. At the time she had felt that if things had happened with Harry then, she felt that would be happy to go along with the flow, but if they did not, then she would deal with it at that time.

But what had seemed like a good idea when Harry was still a shy, introverted teen, with no prospects for a girlfriend, let alone anything more, turned out to be so different when confronted with the reality of the betrothal. The reality that he was already taken had proved Ginny's resolution to be so much bravado. Even Hermione reinforcing what Ginny had already decided earlier in the summer had not fully deterred her. Ginny supposed that she had been quite good about not being too overt, but the prospect of a life without Harry had induced her to attempt to get closer to him; after all, if she could not have all of Harry, then settling for some of Harry seemed like a reasonable compromise.

But Fleur's advice that morning had struck a chord within Ginny. The older girl was completely correct—this... infatuation with Harry was such a part of her that she could not think of any time when her feelings had been any different. She had been focused on him, starting with the stories she had heard frequently as a girl, then by actually meeting him and realizing that he was not at all what the stories had said, not that she had ever truly believed the fanciful children's tales with which she had been raised. And somehow, the fact that Harry was just a young boy with insecurities and an aversion to any kind of recognition endeared him to her all the more. So in light of all of this, Ginny had to admit that Fleur had been entirely correct—she had never allowed herself to think of any other possibility for her future.

But why? Why should she be fixated entirely on Harry? Surely she was so young that she need not even consider such things for several years to come. And could she even be happy with other wives involved in the equation? She had certainly never considered the idea of a multiple marriage, even while she had always known of the possibility—or even the likelihood—of Harry having more than one wife, given the state of his family. It seemed like a serious oversight on her part. But could she do it?

It was with these thoughts in mind that she passed her first two days at home. Fortunately for Ginny, she was able to put her mother off for far longer than she had any right to expect. After a quick breakfast the following day, she had spent the rest of the day with Luna, and when she had arrived back home, had spent some time in the company of her entire family. Her mother, though perhaps not always completely circumspect in the manner in which she dealt

with her family, was not about to have this conversation in front of everyone.

It was Monday morning when Ginny found herself completely unable to avoid the inquisition any longer. Her father had left for work and her brothers had gone out to the Quidditch pitch to fly on their brooms, and Ginny, as she was still pondering the situation, was not quick enough to escape.

The conversation began with the typical banal platitudes about how the school year had gone and what she had learned in her studies, which Ginny, of course, found rather amusing, considering the fact that she and her brothers had already had this conversation with both of her parents. But as they talked, Ginny quickly arrived at the opinion that her mother, though effecting an interest in what they were discussing, was more than a little impatient to get to the subject which was the real thrust of their tête-à-tête. Clearly she hoped that Ginny would bring up the subject but perversely, Ginny decided that she had no intention of speaking of Harry unless her mother forced her to do so. It was, therefore, that her mother finally became impatient and opened the discussion herself.

"And how is Harry, dear?" The words were spoken in a credible manner which her mother undoubtedly intended to be nonchalance mixed with polite curiosity, but Ginny, who knew her mother quite well, could see through her in an instant. Deciding further that her mother's behavior should provoke a similar response, Ginny responded in a manner for which her mother was most certainly not hoping.

"Harry is well. I've seen a lot more of him this past term, what with the Defense Club and all. It's nice to see him finally happy, and I think that his relationship with Fleur has really taken off."

Though her mother appeared as though she had just swallowed a gallon of bobotuber puss, she forced a smile. "That's nice. He's such a nice boy—he deserves a nice girl to settle down with—when he's little older, of course."

"Then you'll be happy to know that Fleur is a very nice girl. I see her as a big sister already."

Her mother regarded her for some moments after her glowing report of Fleur, before she sighed and leaned forward, clasping Ginny's hands between her own. "Ginny, I think I know my daughter, and though you put a brave face on the situation, I know how intense your feelings are. Aren't you upset or disappointed at Harry's betrothal?"

"Disappointed?" Ginny asked. "Of course I'm a little disappointed. Upset? No, not at all. I've had this infatuation for Harry a long time, but I always knew there was no guarantee that he would ever notice me. I'm sure I will get over the disappointment."

"It's not what I would have wanted for you..." her mother began in a very hesitant manner, "but have you ever thought of the fact that Harry may have more than one wife? Have you considered approaching Fleur?"

Of course she had, but Ginny would never admit to her mother—even under the influence of Veritaserum!—that she had done exactly what her mother was suggesting that very morning!

"I'm not sure if I could live that way, mother," Ginny prevaricated. "And I have no indication that Harry sees me as anything other than Ron's little sister." She had not, and neither had Fleur, and with the older witch's abilities, the knowledge of Fleur's opinion made her own doubts seem all that much more real. She was still not certain what she felt about that, but she was certain she would come to some sort of resolution in time.

"I just hate to see you upset," was her mother's worried comment.

"Don't worry, Mum," Ginny responded. "I think it's time to move on with my life. All I ever had was an infatuation, and I know that I need to learn to see beyond that. Who knows? Eventually something may happen between us, but I'm not going to pine away waiting for it. And besides—I'm only fourteen. It's not like I have to rush to get married."

"You're right, I suppose," her mother said with a sigh. "It's just... Well, I've always indulged in the hope that Harry would take a fancy to you. Especially since he's such a nice boy."

"I know, mum. But if it is meant to be, it will happen. Otherwise..."

The thought did not need to be expanded upon, and Ginny was content to allow the conversation to come to an end, as her mother appeared to have nothing more to say. But Ginny was encouraged by her mother's reaction—she half expected, given her Molly Weasley's well known temper and insistence on getting her own way, that she would dig in her heels and refuse to see sense. Now Ginny just had to work through it in her own mind and come to terms with it herself...

A long, dark hall, stretching eerily off into the distance.

Shelves line the walls, shelves which hold row upon row of dusty orbs, gleaming dully in the gloom.

Orbs? Yes, dusty, slivery orbs, of unknown substance.

Each is placed within its own niche built into the shelves, carefully immobilized so that it cannot move or fall.

What can they be?

No matter.

Unimportant.

The shelves and their orbs continue on into the distance, never ending, never beginning. Nothing breaks the monotony.

Movement? A flash of something off in the distance. Shapes, indistinct, shrouded by the murky light.

Approach.

How? Is there a way.

No matter.

The figure comes closer and its indistinct form solidifies like a tower looming through a thick fog. It appears, materializing into the shape of a man.



The man walks slowly through the gloom. He peers this way and that, clearly looking for something. Or scouting. Much like she was doing.

She? Who was she? Does it even matter?

Caution is required.

The man continues slowly down the aisle, scanning the gloom. Looking for something.

Follow.

Suddenly the man turns and gazes back toward...

Harry starts. The figure is known to her. Red hair, slightly balding, jovial features, though etched with concern and caution.

The man is Mr. Weasley! What is he doing here? Where is here?

Stillness. Motionless.

Mr. Weasley begins to walk again, still carefully studying the hall.

After a moment, she follows, slowly gliding toward him.

Gliding? Harry's gaze rotates back and forth, realizing that following is impossible. Harry has no arms and legs.

No arms and legs? What a ludicrous thought! But though Harry tries to look for them, see them, even if he cannot feel them, her eyes stubbornly remain fixed on the form of Mr. Weasley who is getting closer all the time.

She approaches and sees the form of her enemy towering above her.

Enemy? Mr. Weasley is not an enemy!

Why is Harry so much shorter than the Weasley patriarch? Harry is not overly tall, as has been sometimes lamented. But surely Harry is not that short! And Harry has grown in the past months!

Faster. Speeding over the tiles of the floor. Mr. Weasley is now only inches in front of her face.

The first indication the man has that something is wrong is when Harry's sinuous body begins moving up his leg.

Sinuous body?

Harry gasps with recognition; she is a snake!

She wraps herself around the body of the human interloper, an evil gleam in her eyes. Just as her master, she delights in the fear which suddenly blooms in the man's countenance.

Harry can only struggle against his bonds, witnessing the attack with rising horror.

Mouth open wide, she rears back and hisses before darting forward...

Gasping, Harry jolted awake and sat up, his chest heaving, his heart beating wildly, seemingly trying to force its way from the confines of his body. The sheets have been twisted around him and he can feel the slightly oily sheen of sweat dripping from his forehead and staining his bedclothes.

Wearily, Harry wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, vainly attempting to suppress his trembling. Starting, he looked down at his hand, inspecting it as though he had never seen it before. Its form, the lines upon his palm, they were all familiar sights, but almost seemed alien in the aftermath of the dream. There had had not had arms or legs, just scales, eyes, and long gleaming fangs...

Suddenly remembering, Harry's eyes opened wide and he remember the last instant of the dream, the feeling of gliding up Mr. Weasley's body, and the moment when the snake had reared back to strike.

Nagini! But why was he dreaming of Nagini? What could it possibly mean? And was it real?

Grimly, Harry grabbed his wand from a nearby table. Given his history with dreams of Voldemort, he could not take the change that it was not real.

"Expecto Patronum!" he cried, and from his wand, the silvery, comforting form of his stag patronus leapt forth. But whereas it would normally have immediately begun searching for enemies, this time the stag merely stood silent, waiting for him to direct it. He smiled; it was exactly as Hermione said it would be, when she had researched the spell and told him of its other uses.

"Go to Dumbledore," he commanded the patronus. "Mr. Weasley has been attacked by Nagini in a room full of globes."

The stag bowed its head before stamping its front hooves and galloping from the room, speeding through the walls as though they were not even there. Confident that the message would be carried and accepted, Harry swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood from the bed, his legs still feeling unsteady from the dream.

He left his room and made his way down the corridor, knowing that Jean-Sebastian would want to be notified of what had happened. He wondered what time it was; though it was difficult to tell due to the shortness of the midwinter days, he thought it was likely no later than four in the morning, and likely much earlier.

Arriving at the door to the Delacours' room, he took a quick breath before knocking on the door, his manner much more urgent than he had intended. It was only a moment before he heard footsteps approaching and the door opened to reveal the Delacour patriarch. His hair was tousled from sleep and he had hastily thrown a dressing gown over his shoulders. His countenance became instantly concerned, obviously recognizing the distressed expression Harry knew he was wearing.

"Harry, what's wrong?" he asked as he stepped out into the hall and closed the door.

"Something has happened," Harry blurted out.

Though he opened his mouth, presumably to question further, Jean-Sebastian looked around and then motioned for Harry to follow him. Harry was grateful—the hallway was not the location to be having

this conversation and he was feeling slightly lightheaded as his rush of adrenaline faded.

They proceeded down the hallway, stopping when Fleur's door opened and she stuck her head out, frowning when she saw them. "Papa? Harry? What is wrong?"

Jean-Sebastian glanced between Fleur and Harry, and motioned to his daughter to come with them. "I don't know, but it seems like Harry has something to tell us. You may as well hear it now as have Harry repeat it in the morning."

Fleur frowned at Harry, but he just gave her a tired smile in response, to let her know he was fine. They continued along their way until they had arrived in Jean-Sebastian's study several moments later. Motioning them to a pair of chairs which were positioned in front of his desk, Jean-Sebastian sat in his own high backed chair, his fingers steepled in front of him. Harry felt almost like a piece of meat being inspected, though he knew that Jean-Sebastian had no intention of intimidating him or making him feel as such.

"Well, Harry, what has happened?" Jean-Sebastian asked a moment later. "Considering we're all sitting here quite calmly, I assume it's not that urgent?"

Clad in a warm dressing gown, Appoline stepped into the room as Jean-Sebastian spoke, her expression concerned. She stopped to clench Harry's hand in her own, offering support for which Harry was immediately grateful. Appoline then sat in a chair which was situated to the side of the desk and, taking her husband's hand in her own, turned to await Harry's explanation.

Slowly and haltingly, Harry began to tell them of his dream and his experience, recounting in an almost emotionless voice the horror he had felt upon realizing that he was in the mind of a snake, and had bitten his closest friend's father.

Alarmed, Jean-Sebastian rose from his desk in agitation. "We need to summon help for Mr. Weasley!"

"I sent Dumbledore my patronus," Harry blurted.

Jean-Sebastian peered at him for several moments before nodding. "Good thinking, Harry. I didn't know that you knew of that application."

"Hermione researched it when I was learning it in third year," Harry replied almost shyly. "She told me what she'd found."

"Still, we should make sure that Arthur is receiving assistance," Jean-Sebastian declared. He moved to the Floo and began speaking into it.

It appeared that Fleur and Appoline were perceptive enough to realize that he had no desire to speak, as they were silent, Appoline in apparent deep thought, while Fleur held his hand and brushed her thumb lightly across the back in a soothing fashion. Harry attempted to think of nothing while he waited, content to drift on the currents of his thoughts without truly dipping into them. It was some time before Jean-Sebastian's movement caught his attention and he looked up from the half sleep he had fallen into

"Well, it appears you were right, Harry," he said. "Though Dumbledore is trying to keep it as quiet as possible, Arthur was attacked tonight, and it was your quick actions which saved him."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry slumped in his chair and rubbed his eyes wearily. Dreaming you were a snake was disconcerting, but at least in this instance he had been able to help his friend's father.

"But where was he?" Harry asked after a slight hesitation. "What was he doing?"

"I don't have any answers for you, Harry," Jean-Sebastian responded. And though Harry suspected he knew more than he was letting on, he was content to let it go. He was too tired and drained to protest what would normally annoy him. "But rest assured, Harry, I will investigate and get to the bottom of this. I'm concerned about these dreams you have—first it's Voldemort, and now his familiar. We need to find out what's going on, and put a stop to it."

Harry could only agree. Having Voldemort in his head and his dreams was even more wearing on him than the psychopath would otherwise be simply by being after his hide. At that moment, Harry

wanted nothing more than to seek his bed and the oblivion sleep would hopefully bring.

Seeming to sense this, Jean-Sebastian regarded him with an expression of compassion on his face. "I think perhaps the answers will come to us in the morning. We should return to our beds."

Sighing gratefully, Harry left the room with Fleur accompanying him. They said good night with a quick kiss outside her door and Harry returned to his room. He sank down thankfully on the mattress and closed his eyes, allowing sleep to overtake him. But while he was soon asleep, his sleep was fitful that whole night, and he woke many times to the stillness of his room. Neither Voldemort nor Nagini invaded his dreams again, but the night terrors which did were indistinct shapes, calling out to him with distorted voices and mocking tones, baring gleaming fangs.

A/N:

1. Thanks for the continued support. This is posted a day early as tomorrow we are heading out on a very brief family trip and I will not be around to post. I should have no problem getting the next chapter out in time, as I am on vacation for the next two weeks.

2. Hopefully I was able to portray a little softer Molly in this chapter. Though I personally find her somewhat irritating and pushy as a character I do think her behavior is in part because she wants what's best for her children.

3. The Arthur/Nagini confrontation did happen, and Harry was there to save the day. This is a major catalyst for several changes from canon which will be coming up shortly.

4. My oldest son graduated from high school on Friday! I'm really proud of him - he's never been the most studious kid, but he gutted it out and is heading to the local technical school in the fall. The one thought that keeps running through my mind: am I really old enough to have a child who has finished high school?

## Chapter 29 – Forcing the Issue

The morning after Harry's vision saw a determined Jean-Sebastian Delacour gathered with his wife and Sirius Black in the Ambassador's Mansion, determined to get to the bottom of whatever was happening with Harry. He had always known that Voldemort had an unhealthy fascination with his ward, but things were becoming a little too personal and close to home for the French Ambassador.

The night before, after Harry had been sent back to his bed for the rest of the night, Jean-Sebastian had immediately Floo contacted Sirius at his residence in France, and his friend had Flooed to England through the private Floo connection Jean-Sebastian had installed at the mansion as a safety exit. Together with Apolline, they discussed the situation long into the night, finally deciding that they had to approach Dumbledore to obtain the answers—if anyone knew them, it was the Headmaster.

They preparing to go to Hogwarts the next morning, and Jean-Sebastian's mind was working over the events and the answers he wanted from Dumbledore, but he was concerned about their ability to obtain the answers in the face of the man's obvious reticence. In particular, a snippet of the previous evening's conversation stood out in Jean-Sebastian's mind.

"You know Dumbledore will not give up his secrets lightly," Sirius said while leaning back and rubbing his eyes tiredly.

Jean-Sebastian peered sharply at his friend. "He would try to keep as important a matter as this from us, Harry's guardians?"

"It's the way he is," Sirius reply with a shrug. "During the first war with Voldemort, he played his cards very close to his vest."

"You would fight for a man who did not trust you with knowledge you needed to fight effectively?"

Though Sirius did not dispute Jean-Sebastian's words, he did attempt to explain his reasons for following the Headmaster. "Dumbledore was the only one who was doing anything. It was a dark time. You could never know who was secretly allied with Voldemort, and the Ministry was fighting a losing battle. Dumbledore

gave us information at certain times which helped us fight the Death Eaters, but the most important secrets he kept to himself."

Considering Sirius's comments, Jean-Sebastian was not impressed with this knowledge. A firm believer in the necessity of people knowing what they were fighting against and what they were fighting for, to Jean-Sebastian such secrecy was almost incomprehensible. Perhaps it was better that he remove his family along with Harry back to France to protect them? He decided to wait until after the conversation to make any decisions, but given the events of the previous evening, he knew that a refusal by the Headmaster to be explicit could very well push him in that direction.

"You must not think that Dumbledore is evil, or that he deliberately conceals things that others need to know," Sirius spoke up again, interrupting Jean-Sebastian's thoughts. "There are times when his reticence can be maddening. But there are also some things which I believe he keeps to himself because they are vital to our efforts and to prevent the enemy from gaining an upper hand. He just sometimes takes this to extremes."

"Well, he had better be prepared to share with us," was Jean-Sebastian's firm reply.

"If he doesn't, he'll have me to contend with," Apolline stated, her voice low and menacing.

Now Jean-Sebastian understood that Dumbledore had fought against the darkness for a good part of his life, and that he had fought the good fight, and emerged victorious more often than not. However, he could not countenance such secrecy in the man, not if he was to be effective in protecting not only Harry, but his family, and those under his employ at the manor. In a sense, all those who had followed him here from France had put their lives on the line in supporting him in his role as ambassador. And as for Harry, Jean-Sebastian was genuinely impressed with the young man and wanted what was best for him. If there was anything in Dumbledore's secrets which affected him, he had a right to know, and Jean-Sebastian would be damned if he allowed Dumbledore to obfuscate and hold onto his secrets like a man adrift at sea held onto a branch of a tree. To effectively oppose the darkness, it was necessary to share all pertinent information. And in the back of his mind, Jean-Sebastian was feeling a certain measure of guilt that he had kept the



prophecy from Harry, especially so soon after promising that he would be open with the young man. That needed to be rectified.

A quick Floo call later and Jean-Sebastian and Sirius were stepping through the Floo to Dumbledore's office. Fortunately, Jean-Sebastian had convinced Apolline to remain at home with the children rather than accompany them—his wife, though intelligent and thoughtful, possessed a fiery temper, which in a large part was a trait of her Veela heritage, and Jean-Sebastian doubted her ability to remain calm in the face of what he suspected Dumbledore would have to tell them.

"Jean-Sebastian. Sirius," Dumbledore greeted them as they stepped through into the Headmaster's office. The elderly man appeared exhausted, as though he had been up most of the night. And Jean-Sebastian suspected he had, with the news which Harry had sent to him the previous night, and the efforts he knew the Headmaster had been making to keep the situation as quiet as possible. "I cannot say that I'm surprised to see you here this morning."

"Nor should you be," Jean-Sebastian responded. "Sirius and I are very concerned about the situation with Harry and we need to know what is happening. The place Harry described in his... vision, sounded like the Hall of Prophecy. Can we assume that his dream had to do with the prophecy you referred to last summer?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I suspect it did. Nagini seems to have been a scout and she came across Arthur by chance."

"But what was Arthur doing there in the first place?" Sirius asked.

"Members of the order have been keeping an eye on the hall," Dumbledore responded. "Though I did not know that Arthur was going to check on it last night, from what I understand, he was working late, trying to complete some tasks before the holidays, and decided that it would be the perfect time to check quickly and make certain nothing was amiss. It was simple coincidence that Nagini happened to be there at the same time."

Sirius and Jean-Sebastian shared a look. "He's after the prophecy?"

"I can only assume. He must realize that he does not have the full text, and rather than risking another confrontation with Harry, he

must be determined to know the full contents. Harry has stood up to him several times and lived, after all. That must be difficult for one of Voldemort's ego to take."

"Is the prophecy in danger?" Jean-Sebastian demanded. "Should we take Harry in to retrieve it?"

"I would recommend against that at this time," was Dumbledore's firm response. "Nagini appears to have been an advance scout and the magics protecting the prophecy orbs are ancient and powerful. It will take some time for the dark lord to circumvent them."

"Besides, taking Harry to the Hall of Prophecy would almost certainly attract attention and there are certain... elements at the Ministry that remain ignorant of the prophecy. It is in our best interests to keep it that way."

It was obvious that Dumbledore was referring to Fudge, though the existence of the prophecy was best kept from everyone who was not currently in the know. And Jean-Sebastian could not fault Dumbledore's logic—the man had clearly thought this through and his reasoning was sound. This was not what Jean-Sebastian had come here to know, and as such, he was more than willing to drop the subject in favor of more important concerns.

"Very well," said Jean-Sebastian, after receiving a silent nod of agreement from Sirius. "That is not what we wished to discuss this morning anyway, though it is good that you are keeping us advised of what is happening with the prophecy. I am more concerned over the fact that Harry dreamed the attack, but also that this is not the first time that he has seen Voldemort in his dreams. Would you care to explain what you know of this most troubling phenomenon?"

"It is not unknown for powerful wizards to see a glimpse of future events. Harry may have a slight gift of prescience, which allowed him to witness what he did."

It was clear that Dumbledore was prevaricating and Jean-Sebastian was in no mood for his attempts to put them off. "You are correct, but that is not what has happened in this case," Jean-Sebastian replied, unable to keep the gruffness and impatience from his voice. "Harry clearly stated that not only did he witness the attack, but that

he saw it from Nagini's point of view. For a time, he even had difficulty separating himself from the snake. That is not a prescient vision, Dumbledore, and the other times he has seen Voldemort do not fit into your explanation either."

The Headmaster sighed and he leaned back in his desk, wearily rubbing his eyes. After a moment, he replaced his half-moon glasses, and peered back at them, clearly not wishing to have this discussion.

"It appears that Harry has a... connection—for lack of a better term—to Voldemort."

"And what does the snake have to do with it?" Sirius asked.

"Nagini is Voldemort's familiar, and as such, if Harry has a connection with the dark lord, then logically, that connection extends to the familiar."

There was just enough hesitation in Dumbledore's answer that Jean-Sebastian knew, even if he had not already suspected, that the man was not telling them everything.

"Would you care to speculate on exactly what this connection is?"

"I'm not certain it would be prudent to do so at this time."

Jean-Sebastian glared at the Headmaster with some asperity, noting through the corner of his eye that Sirius was exhibiting the same frustration. "Headmaster," he began in a very deliberate but determined manner, "Sirius and I are responsible for Harry's welfare and we are not able to perform those duties to the best of our ability with incomplete information. If you know something, I insist you tell us."

The look with which Dumbledore pierced them was unexpected, laced with frustration, and perhaps a little resignation. However, it clearly spoke to the fact that they had convinced him to share his secrets with them. Or maybe it was more that they had given him no choice—Dumbledore was a wizard who had grown accustomed to keeping his secrets and making the decisions he deemed best. But Jean-Sebastian was not one to simply follow blindly; if Dumbledore wanted that sort of follower, he would have to look elsewhere for it.

Drawing his wand from somewhere within his robes, Dumbledore shot off several spells in succession. Jean-Sebastian, who was watching the old wizard closely, was impressed by the extensive array of privacy charms, imperturbable charms, and wards—it was apparent that this was of grave import to the Headmaster.

"I can tell you what I know," Dumbledore began in a hard tone, "but for the most part, I only have guesses at this point. If I am right, then this knowledge could mean the difference between victory and defeat. If Voldemort were to learn what I suspect, it would become much more difficult to counter what he has done. I must have absolute assurance that you will not spread this knowledge to anyone!"

Jean-Sebastian turned to Sirius and, seeing his acceptance, turned back to the Headmaster and gave him his assurance, though with a caveat.

"I will agree with you given one condition," Jean-Sebastian finally answered, noting the stern glare of disapproval the Headmaster directed at him. It was clear that he was not used to being contradicted.

"If I do not accept your terms, then I will not share anything with you," Dumbledore stated. "This matter is that important and it is already against my better judgment to be telling you of it, let alone anyone else."

"Harry needs to know, Albus," Sirius spoke up from Jean-Sebastian where he had remained silent to that point. "And before you start in on how he's still just a child and cannot be burdened with the responsibility, keep in mind that he has not been a child for a very long time. He's much more mature than either James or I was at his age, and his experiences and other recent events have greatly accelerated his experience."

The belligerence drained away from Dumbledore, once again making him appear tired and old. "I was afraid you would insist on this."

Dumbledore sat in his chair, seemingly staring at nothing, but Jean-Sebastian could tell that he was furiously considering the situation

and presumably the ramifications of revealing to the young man what Jean-Sebastian thought they should. Jean-Sebastian sympathized with him and given that this was obviously a weighty matter, could not fault him for his caution. But it was right—somehow, not even knowing what Dumbledore was to impart to them, Jean-Sebastian knew deep within himself that Harry needed to know this information.

Jean-Sebastian glanced over at Sirius, but while the other man did not speak, he shook his head. As Sirius knew Dumbledore better than he, Jean-Sebastian decided to let him work through his thoughts.

Finally, Dumbledore appeared to come to some resolution, and though he did not appear happy about it, he once again focused his attention on them, his manner serious and grave. "I will tell you what I know and agree that Harry should be told. However, once you are aware you may agree with me that it should be kept from him."

"We will see," was Jean-Sebastian's firm reply, "but I doubt it."

"You also know that anything you tell him, he will tell your daughter and Miss Granger?"

"I suspect," Jean-Sebastian admitted, "but I know that Fleur can keep it to herself, and Miss Granger has struck me as an intelligent young woman, who is completely devoted to Harry. I think we can trust them both to remain quiet, especially if Harry's welfare depends on it."

Sirius laughed his agreement. "You've got that right. Those two are almost joined at the hip. If there are any secrets about Harry which could hurt him, Hermione will keep them as close as you or I. And given the tone of Harry's letters, his closeness with Fleur appears to be approaching the same level. I doubt you have anything to worry about with either of them."

It was with a frown that Jean-Sebastian considered Sirius's words. It was uncomfortably close to some observations Jean-Sebastian had made of the Harry and Hermione the previous summer, and at certain times he had seen them since they had left for Hogwarts. They were close; Jean-Sebastian had known this from the beginning, since Sirius had spoken to him about enacting the betrothal—he had

wanted to know if he was interrupting any childhood romances for Harry should he go through with the betrothal. While Sirius had glibly laughed it off, telling him that Harry was not attached to anyone, Jean-Sebastian had thought his answer a little too pat at the time, and that feeling had not faded when he had witnessed Harry's interaction with the young witch. Was there something more than just friendship between them?

It did not matter, Jean-Sebastian decided. Harry was well able to determine his course of life, and as marriage to Fleur did bring its own... unique set of problems—as Jean-Sebastian was acutely aware—if Harry chose a path different from the one he himself had chosen, then Jean-Sebastian could not fault him for it, especially if he did possess feelings for the girl. It was better to not get involved—Harry was trustworthy, and Fleur was more than mature enough to manage her own affairs. That did not mean Jean-Sebastian did not want to know what was happening between them, and he suspected he knew just who to ask...

"Very well," Dumbledore was saying in response to Sirius's words. "But truly the fewer people who are aware of this, the better. Jean-Sebastian, I assume that you will wish to inform your wife, but other than that, no one is to know. Am I clear?"

Once he had extracted the required promise, Dumbledore was all business. "Now, you must understand that I have no proof, and I do not know that there is a way to obtain the required proof. However, I have a set of circumstances that rather neatly fit my suspicions."

Taking a deep breath, Dumbledore looked each of them in the eye in turn and continued, "I believe that Harry's scare is no ordinary scar. In fact, I suspect that on the night his parents were murdered, that Voldemort created a Horcrux which inadvertently lodged itself behind Harry's scar."

"Mon dieu!" Jean-Sebastian exclaimed in time with Sirius's, "Merlin!"

Grimly, Dumbledore nodded. "I take it you are aware of the nature of a Horcrux?"

"A soul anchor," Jean-Sebastian responded. "A method a dark wizard will use to try to cheat death by imbuing a portion of his soul into an object, thereby keeping his own soul from passing on to the

next life when he dies. To enable himself to detach a portion of his soul, he has to commit the most offensive crime, which is the most damaging to his own soul—he has to murder someone in cold blood."

"Are you serious?" Sirius exclaimed in horror as Jean-Sebastian finished his explanation. "I found some references to Horcruxes in the Black family library and knew it had something to do with soul magic, and was particularly foul, but I didn't know it was this bad."

Dumbledore's eyes snapped to Sirius and he peered at the other man with a blazing intensity. "There are references to Horcruxes in your family's library?"

"References, yes. But nothing more than that, to the best of my knowledge. My family, has been dark for several centuries, after all."

"They must be destroyed," Dumbledore stated decisively. "Knowledge of this magic must be eradicated at all costs to prevent others from making use of it."

Holding his hands up in acquiescence, Sirius said, "I agree with you, Dumbledore. When I was there last year, I went through the books as something to keep me busy. Anything with dark magics or anything I thought was cursed, I set aside and sequestered under the family wards. That will do until we have time to do a more thorough investigation."

"Agreed," said Dumbledore, before he turned his attention back to the matter at hand. "I am rather surprised at both of you knowing of Horcruxes."

"I was Director of France's DMLE for a time," Jean-Sebastian responded. "Knowing of dangerous magics like Horcruxes was part of the job."

"I understand. But I'm sure that you can now see why this information must be kept a secret."

"I can," began Jean-Sebastian, anger beginning to build within him. "But I must admit that I wonder why you have never told Harry of this."

"What was I to say, Jean-Sebastian?" Dumbledore snapped. "I couldn't exactly tell him that I believed he hosted a portion of a madman's soul when he arrived at Hogwarts at the age of eleven. Besides, I cannot be completely certain and I did not wish to burden him, especially since I do not know yet how to remove the Horcrux."

"I suppose not," Jean-Sebastian agreed with some reluctance. And he had to admit the Headmaster had a point. But the situation was now changed and Harry much better able to bear the burden; and besides, the young man deserved to know something which would have such a profound effect on his life. "But you do believe it can be removed."

"Every magic can be countered, Jean-Sebastian," Dumbledore rumbled, slipping into professor mode. "You should know this. I have not yet discovered a way to remove it, but that does not mean that it does not exist. And ever since I began to suspect this I have not been idle—I have picked up every book on dark magic or esoteric treatise on the soul that I can find, and explored every lead I was able to uncover in an effort to locate a counter-spell. I recently received a tip of several more books for which I have great hopes."

"So Harry is a Horcrux and until he is free of it, Voldemort cannot be killed," Sirius summed up the situation. "Well that's just bloody great."

"Unfortunately, Sirius, I believe it is much worse than that."

"Worse?" Sirius exclaimed. "How can it be any worse?"

"Simply, I don't believe that Harry's scar is the only Horcrux the dark lord created," was Dumbledore's quiet response.

As Jean-Sebastian and Sirius looked on with dread, the Headmaster produced a small key and opened a drawer on the side of his desk. He produced a small diary from within its confines and placed it on the top of his desk between them. It was small and black, and pages were warped. It had a large hole in its center, appearing like it had almost been burnt through the leather and paper. It was charred and tattered, and from the chair in which he sat, Jean-Sebastian fancied that he could detect a miasma of evil oozing from the ruined book, almost like the distant smell of a dead animal which had been left to rot in the hot summer sun.



"This is a Horcrux?" Jean-Sebastian asked softly.

"Was a Horcrux," Dumbledore corrected. "This is the diary which Harry destroyed in his second year, after he killed the basilisk. I believe this diary is the first Horcrux which Voldemort created during his years at Hogwarts."

Jean-Sebastian immediately understood the implications. "Mon dieu! How many of these abominations did he create?"

"Of course I only have guesses and conjecture," Dumbledore replied. "But given what I know of the dark lord, and knowing his skill in Arithmancy, I can speculate that he would have used a number which was significant."

"That would mean three, seven, or thirteen," Jean-Sebastian said with a nod.

"Correct."

"Hold on a moment," Sirius interrupted. "How could he make so many? Making a Horcrux splits the soul. After the first he would only have half a soul, a quarter after the second, an eighth after the third, etc. How could he split it so many times?"

"Ah, and that is what most people think," Dumbledore responded. "But unfortunately, your assumption is a fallacy. No one really knows the nature of the soul for certain and I do not wish to go off into a tangent, but even if a piece of the soul is broken off from the rest, you cannot assume that it is split exactly in half. My research suggests that actually the soul is fractured into many smaller pieces, and that one of these is drawn off to create the Horcrux, leaving the rest in the body. With a little time, these pieces will once again grow together, though the soul missing a piece of itself renders the creator a little less human each time he creates another."

Considering the situation and what Dumbledore had told them, Jean-Sebastian knew there was potentially no limit to the number Voldemort may have created, other than his own will to continue to pursue his "immortality". "So he could have created many."

"I don't think so," Dumbledore responded. "Though of course I cannot predict with any degree of accuracy just how much information he was able to unearth regarding Horcruxes, he may believe what Sirius stated about how much of the soul is consumed in the creation of a Horcrux. At the very least, I think he would have been cautious of creating too many, given the effect even one has on the person. I believe that too many would leave the creator as almost unrecognizable as human, and quite possibly completely insane. Voldemort fears death and wishes to live forever, but not at the expense of his sanity."

"Three or seven then?" Sirius asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "My guess is seven, including the portion that still resides in his body. If it was three, then with Harry and the diary, there would be no more. I suspect, however, that he has used various enchanted items of great significance to create his Horcruxes, almost in the manner of trophies. I am searching for some confirmation on what I suspect, but have no further, more concrete information to share with you at this time. At the very least, I also suspect that Nagini, his familiar, is also a Horcrux. He appears to have much more control over the snake than he would if it was just a simple familiar."

"But that could then be the reason why Harry was able to dream of the snake," Jean-Sebastian exclaimed. "If they both have Horcruxes in them..."

"That is possible," Dumbledore conceded. "But really immaterial, in any case."

"So what do you plan to do?" Jean-Sebastian asked, knowing that he would give his full assistance to whatever Dumbledore intended.

"I shall continue to search for Voldemort's Horcruxes, and destroy them when I find them," Dumbledore told them. "In the meantime, however, we have other important tasks which must be completed, convincing the Minister of the threat of the dark lord, and moving the Ministry to war footing in order to oppose him, being highest on the priority list."

"Like we have any hope of doing that," Sirius grumbled under his breath, and privately Jean-Sebastian agreed with him.

"Fudge's obstructionism makes it difficult, but we must persevere if we are to hope to counter the dark lord," said Dumbledore. "But of more immediate importance is the fact that the secret of the Horcruxes must be safeguarded. Harry's connection with Voldemort is potentially a very dangerous security leak, and it must be closed if he is to know the secret. I do not believe the dark lord is aware of the connection as of yet, but should he learn of it and know that we are aware of his Horcruxes, it could be disastrous."

"Occlumency?"

"In a word, yes. If Harry applies himself, he should be proficient enough very quickly to withstand all but a concentrated frontal assault, which could only be done if they are in close proximity with one another. I can have him start working with Severus once he returns to the castle after the New Year."

"Albus, are you barmy?" Sirius demanded. "Snape hates Harry with a passion, a sentiment which is returned in equal measure, I might add, and rightly so."

"I am aware of the antipathy between them, Sirius, but I believe that Severus is most capable of doing this. And if I order him to do so, I believe he will set aside his feelings and do as I ask. He wishes for Voldemort's defeat as much as we do, I assure you."

"No," Jean-Sebastian contradicted. "Sirius is right, and I will not allow this man any more authority over Harry than he already has."

"Jean-Sebastian, I understand your reticence in the matter of Severus and his relationship with Harry," Dumbledore said in a soothing tone of voice. "But Severus is very skilled and is more than capable of teaching him properly. I cannot do it myself as I have far too many other items to deal with—Severus is really the only choice."

"Not the only choice," Jean-Sebastian disagreed. It was time to be firm—Snape could not be allowed to instruct Harry in so delicate and critical a matter. "Fleur can teach him. She has been learning Occlumency for several years now and is now quite skilled—I began teaching her before she attended school. I will speak to her and ask her to teach Harry when he returns to Hogwarts."

Even Dumbledore had to admit that this was a superior plan as, regardless of whatever hold he had over Severus Snape, it would logically be easier for Harry to learn from someone he trusted. They agreed that Jean-Sebastian would approach Fleur to enlist her help, and that they would begin when they returned to school in the New Year.

"Then I believe we have our plan," Dumbledore stated.

"We do," Jean-Sebastian responded, before fixing Dumbledore with a knowing look. "When did you intend to inform Harry?"

"I believe it would be better to wait until after Christmas," Dumbledore responded somewhat reluctantly. Jean-Sebastian knew he had been hoping that the discussion had changed their minds about the need to inform Harry, but Jean-Sebastian had to give the man credit for not obstructing them any further. "This will be Harry's first Christmas with your family, and I would prefer to wait until after to burden him with this so that we do not ruin his enjoyment of the holidays."

That in and of itself told Jean-Sebastian that, whatever mistakes he had made with Harry in the past, Dumbledore had the boy's best interests at heart. He agreed that there was nothing lost in waiting an extra ten days or so and let the matter drop, and soon he and Sirius took their leave and Flooed back to the Ambassador's Manor, and Sirius, subsequently back to Chateau Delacour. Jean-Sebastian sat wearily in the chair at his desk, considering all that he had learned that morning. The whole situation had suddenly become a lot more complicated, and there was nothing he could do about it, though his every instinct screamed at him to leave England behind and protect his family. But his course was already set and honor—not to mention his sense of loyalty to Harry and his own common sense—dictated that he stay the course.

Having had a full day to catch up on sleep and to come to terms with the vision he had seen, Harry woke on Thursday morning feeling much better than he had the previous day. The thought of being pulled into the mind of a large, mutant attack snake was still frightening to be sure, but he had been able to at least console himself with the fact that some good had come from it. He was truly fond of Mr. Weasley and was happy he had been able to do

something to help his friend's father. In fact, Hermione was arriving with her parents to the manor that day and Harry had obtained permission from Jean-Sebastian to go and visit him today before they were to depart for France on the following day.

Hermione arrived by Portkey late in the morning with her parents in tow, and was welcomed to the manor by the Delacours. Harry, of course, was excited to see his friend, though they had only been separated for a few days, and was greatly anticipating the coming holidays—he just knew it would be the best holiday he had ever had.

"Wow, someone is excited!" Hermione said with a laugh once Harry had completed his rather exuberant greeting.

"I'm always excited to see you, Hermione," Harry replied with a grin.

He turned to greet her parents politely, and was afforded the same warmth in response. Her parents, William and Elizabeth, were friendly and open, and insisted that there would be "none of that Mr. or Mrs. Granger stuff", instead telling Harry that he should call them by their given names. William was tall, slim and athletic, and possessed a certain air which projected confidence, not to mention a little intimidation, for anyone who would possibly take a fancy to his little girl in the coming years. That it may be Harry himself who would ultimately fall into that role, if Fleur's wishes came about, was not exactly a comforting thought. It was even more uncomfortable to consider it when Harry thought of the fact that in the Christian Muggle world, monogamy had been an accepted practice for many years, and that they would not likely accept such an arrangement with any degree of sanguinity. Elizabeth, by contrast, was warm and friendly and extremely engaging, not to mention being a carbon copy of Hermione, possessing the same brown hair and warm brown eyes, not to mention her height and facial features. Though to be completely accurate, Harry supposed that it was Hermione who was a carbon copy of Elizabeth, rather than the reverse.

After a few moments of polite conversation, the three teens—accompanied by Gabrielle, who tagged along behind them—excused themselves and left the room to go catch up on the events of the previous few days. Hermione had not had anything remarkable happen in her first few days away from school; she had mainly occupied herself by spending time with her parents and getting some Christmas shopping done, though she was laughingly

adamant in not spoiling the surprise of what she had purchased for them for Christmas. Harry was well aware that she was not about to share such intelligence with him, but he teased her about it anyway, earning himself a mock-serious reproof in response.

When the conversation turned to what had happened at the manor, it became much weightier. His explanation of the dream and the actions he had taken to inform the Headmaster and his guardian of the attack prompted sympathy from Hermione, and a little deeper hero-worship from Gabrielle, who had not managed to wheedle the story from him the previous day. She was more than a little perturbed at the fact that she had slept through all of the excitement, regardless of Harry's protests that he wished it had never even happened.

"That's awful, Harry!" Hermione commiserated once he had completed his tale. "But thank goodness you were able to help Mr. Weasley."

"Yeah, that's the good part of it, I guess."

"It will be okay, Harry. Remember, you have Fleur and me looking after you. Voldemort wouldn't dare try anything!"

"Why?" Harry teased with a grin. "You'd study him to death if he tried anything?"

Hermione sniffed with disdain. "I'll have you know I am more than capable of hexing his bits off if he doesn't behave himself."

The conversation was light and silly, but it provided Harry with exactly what he needed—a relief of stress and a little lighthearted banter at the expense of what had been a very serious situation. Harry suspected that Hermione well knew what he needed and had provided it deliberately. She was such a good friend—he was not sure what he ever would have done without her.

Later that afternoon, the group, including Harry, Hermione, Fleur and Jean-Sebastian, gathered together to Floo to St. Mungos where Arthur Weasley was staying and due to be released the following day. Harry was looking forward to seeing the jovial wizard, and replacing the last image he had of the man with something infinitely happier.

They arrived at the hospital and were directed toward the room in which Mr. Weasley was staying. As they walked, Harry looked around with interest, noting the white walls and narrow hallways. With the exception of the lack electronic equipment which would have been a fixture in any modern hospital, St. Mungos was not very different than any hospital he would have seen in the Muggle world.

They rounded a corner and approached Mr. Weasley's room, and as they were walking, the door opened and the Weasley matriarch stepped into the corridor. Her face lit up in genuine pleasure at the sight of Harry, though he did notice a tightening of her eyes when she glanced at his companions. At his side, Harry could almost feel Hermione stiffening as she saw Ron's mother—she had not seen the woman since the infamous howler had arrived, after all, and Harry knew that her feelings for Molly Weasley were somewhat less than cordial. Molly did not acknowledge Harry's companions—she instead ignored them completely and approached Harry with a large smile on her face, and with her arms held out wide for one of her infamous hugs.

Neatly sidestepping her, Harry held up his hand and, catching Jean-Sebastian's eye, he motioned for the man to precede him into the room. The older man seemed to catch his meaning as he shepherded Hermione and Fleur from the corridor, leaving Harry with a confused and slightly flustered Mrs. Weasley.

"Harry?" she said with a small frown. "Is something wrong?"

"Unfortunately, there is, Mrs. Weasley."

She smiled at him and patted his arm. "What is it? I will do whatever I can to help."

"I certainly hope you will," was Harry's response. He kept his voice calm and even as he was speaking, knowing that she would likely not take kindly to what he had to say. But though he was only fifteen, and she would undoubtedly think that he was overstepping his place, she needed to hear this.

"You see, Mrs. Weasley, I could not help but notice your rather cold greeting toward not only my betrothed, but also to my best friend."

Her eyes narrowed and she peered at him with some affront. "I assure you that I was not unkind to them."

"No," Harry agreed, "but you have been unkind to them, especially to Hermione with that howler you sent to her. And to be perfectly blunt, you've never apologized to her for that, even though you publicly humiliated her in the Great Hall in front of all the students."

"Harry Potter!" Molly screeched. "I will not have you reprimanding me! You are just fifteen years old and should remember your place. I raised you better than that!"

"You didn't raise me, Mrs. Weasley," Harry replied in a quiet voice. She was taken aback, to the extent that she almost physically took a step back, and her face fell. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley, but it's the truth. I spent two weeks with your family before second year, and two more before fourth. I'm sorry but four weeks out of the fifteen years of my life does not qualify as you 'raising me'."

Molly sputtered at this, but could come up with nothing to refute his claim, as it was the simple truth. Instead, she glared at him and snapped, "You should be more grateful that we took you in and treated you like one of our own!"

"I am very grateful," said Harry. "I needed friends badly, and your family provided them. And though it was only for a short time, you also provided a loving, nurturing environment, and I appreciate it very much."

"But now that you have family," she spat the word resentfully, "grander than the Weasleys, you have thrown us over entirely. I should have expected it, I suppose."

"And that is where you are wrong," Harry responded, still keeping his composure, but injecting a hint of steel into his tone. "I still consider Ron to be one of my best friends, and Ginny has become more of a friend since the summer. I don't think I even need to mention the twins—even though you think they are wild and lack seriousness, they are the best friends a bloke could hope for. I would not be here if I had 'thrown you over'."

"Then why are you giving me this attitude, young man?"



"Because you hurt my friend and haven't apologized, and you continue to treat my betrothed as though she is unworthy. Nothing could be further from the truth," Harry emphasized. "Fleur and her family are among the best people I have ever known and I am honored that she is now my intended."

Though she said nothing, Molly's affront was evident in her stiff posture and her scowl of disapproval. Harry did not want to offend her or belittle her, but he was more than willing to take her to task for her behavior. It was a mark of how much he had changed. The old Harry Potter would never have spoken this way to his friend's mother; it would have seemed too much like talking back to his uncle—something to avoid at all costs, due to the man's temper.

"Mrs. Weasley, I want to maintain good relationships with your family, and I think I have for the most part. But I also require you to treat my intended with the respect she deserves and apologize to Hermione. Until you can do so, I don't think we have anything further to say to each other."

"I suppose you want a public apology?" Mrs. Weasley accused in a dispirited tone. "Perhaps I should send another howler apologizing or take out an ad in the Prophet?"

"How you do it is your choice, of course," Harry said. "But I don't necessarily think that humiliating yourself is required. But an apology needs to be made directly to Hermione, however you accomplish it."

Having had his say, Harry nodded to his friends' mother and entered the room, leaving her in the corridor, looking downcast and staring at the floor.

The mood in the room appeared to be somewhat tense as the Weasleys in attendance—besides Mr. Weasley, the twins, Ginny, and Ron were all there—appeared to suspect what had kept him. His easy greeting to the entire room served to dispel some of the stress, while Mr. Weasley's answer and predilection to joviality went a long way toward restoring equilibrium to the room.

"Well here's our hero!" Mr. Weasley joked, showing a large smile to Harry.

Blushing slightly, Harry responded, "I'm no hero, Mr. Weasley. I just happened to be in a position to send a bit of help."

"Ah, but you are a hero to me, Harry." He leaned forward and extended a hand, which Harry grasped firmly in his own. "Thank you for once again coming to the aid of me and my family. I truly appreciate it, young man."

"Oh Harry, you're my hero too!" one of the twins piped up in a contrived tone of worship.

"Simply dreamy!" exclaimed the other.

"We're so thankful for your manliness and your tendency to save us from monsters!"

"But I really think you've gone about it all wrong."

"Too right, Gred," continued the first, with a sly wink at his brother. "You're supposed to slay the beast first."

"And then ride off into the sunset with the fair maiden."

"You've already got the maiden," said Gred, with a sly wink at Fleur.

"But you've still got some work ahead of you for the rest!"

Mr. Weasley shook his head at his twin sons. "Can't you two ever be serious about anything? Even your father's savior?"

"Of course we can," said Forge agreeably.

"But the tension in the room needed deflating," agreed Gred.

"You've been saved, all is well, and it's time to let the gloominess go!"

"Hey guys," Harry said, pointedly ignoring their byplay. He also greeted Ron and Ginny in the same manner, before sitting on a nearby chair. "How are you feeling, Mr. Weasley?"

"Pretty good now, actually. I get released tomorrow, so I'll be home in time for Christmas."

"Christmas in St. Mungos!" spoke up one of the twins. "That would be pretty bad."

"For once, I have to agree with you, son. Happily, I won't have to experience it."

Tactfully, after thanking Harry for his assistance, Mr. Weasley proceeded to let the matter drop, which was truly a relief for Harry. He did not feel as though he had done anything heroic, after all—he had merely seen something in a dream and acted upon it. Anyone could have done the same in his position.

The visit continued for some time and though the atmosphere might have been gloomy in other circumstances, it was quite cheerful for the most part. Mr. Weasley spoke of his latest interest in Muggle contraptions, the twins were their usual irrepressible selves, and laughter and conversation abounded between them all. Ron and Ginny privately extended their thanks to Harry, after which they spoke of their plans for Christmas.

They were nearing the end of their stay before the door to Mr. Weasley's room opened and Mrs. Weasley walked in, followed by a tall, red-haired man, who bore a remarkable resemblance to the Weasley patriarch.

"Bill!" Harry greeted him, remembering fondly the previous year when Bill had come to Hogwarts to watch the third task.

"Hey Harry," Bill stated as he walked over and grasped Harry's hand, enveloping him in a gruff hug. "Thanks again, sport. It seems like battling basilisks and dragons is not enough for you—now you've come to my father's rescue."

"I didn't do a whole lot, Bill," said Harry, as he colored in embarrassment.

"You did enough, Harry, and that is what's important."

Nodding, Harry accepted the praise before changing the subject. Bill was like a much-loved elder brother to Harry, and he appreciated his willingness to allow the subject to drop, much as his father had.

What Harry did not miss was the frequent looks that Bill stole when he thought Fleur was not looking, though to be honest, Harry did remember similar behavior from the man the previous year, during the day before the third task. He was not overt in his interest, and he obviously knew that Fleur was now betrothed to Harry. But it was also obvious that he was a little smitten by the young French Veela, and Harry wondered what might have happened, and if Fleur would have returned his interest, had the situation been different. As he was discrete, and Harry was well aware of the interest his betrothed generated, he said nothing, though he did share an expressive glance with Fleur when no one else was looking.

The visitors only stayed for a few more minutes before they excused themselves, amid much wishing of happiness for the holiday season, and promises to meet up again at the express. As they walked away from the room, Harry reflected on his friendship with the quirky family. They really had provided him with help and love when he had needed it, regardless of his words to Mrs. Weasley—or perhaps, in accordance with them. Hopefully, Mrs. Weasley would see the wisdom of his words—if he was allowed to be so conceited in considering his thoughts "wisdom"—and apologize. She had been the first mother-like figure he had ever had, and he would prefer to maintain good relations with her. Only time would tell.

A/N:

1. As always, I appreciate everyone who takes the time to read and comment. This story has now had more than 1,000,000 hits. Thanks again to everyone!

2. For those who thought Mrs. Weasley got off easily in chapter 16, oh ye of little faith! Some of you may think that she should give a public apology, but I think it's more meaningful just to make the attempt than to make a big show of it. Of course, it would be even more meaningful if she did it without any prompting, but personally, I don't think that Molly is the type of person to admit she's wrong very gracefully...

3. And if you think Harry is a little out of character in confronting her, I simply think it's a mark of how he's changed and grown since moving to a nurturing environment. He's growing in confidence and emulating Jean-Sebastian to a certain extent, and that will end up being more than a little important.

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